沙耶の唄

SAYANOUTA

大槻涼樹・虚淵玄
(Nitroplus)

原作脚本／虚淵玄(Nitroplus)
原作／Nitroplus
Illustration／中央東口

e-FICTIONS
SEIKAISHA

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F-FICTIONS
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星海社 FICTIONS

沙耶の唄

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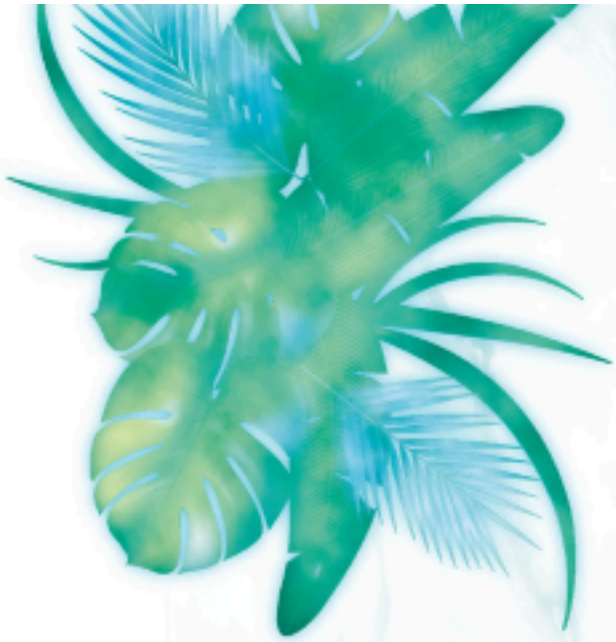

第一章
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エピローグ

"HHY." the wriggling mass of flesh burbles, "*G$Hsy%3whY&Xtr1p%3?"
"H#H#. KS5GiVe52fdf%^#TSU+BA. HI#~TG^Sk5tI#GR3NSTLY."

Three such creatures sit around the table in front of me, slurping filthy sludge from their cups as they trade whines, growls, and sounds that I cannot describe.

"H#YISTSOST3rngTHzTOVEN#V4rBNSK1^pkzb4?H?!"
"AdN (TH79HRRM3N1S&8$RZ20SnoWSdyZRPI2SS"
"L1ttKnD6FScRed.;k'azS8L135ffff^$@$%kn1JZ*

By listening carefully, I am able to grasp the gist of their conversation and respond when it is required of me. This is necessary to avoid arousing their suspicion.

However these creatures look, they are my friends, apparently.

I wish that I could still deny it, but I gave up on that a long time ago. Night after night, I went to sleep praying for an end to this nightmare, only to wake each morning to the same twisted hellscape as the day Before.

I know now that I have to blend in, that I have to act like one of them. Such has been my life these past three months, and so it will remain until the day I die.

"B&UWRbl;/tO2jUtS7RtSK#N6@@@™
"NIv9ydiff:* MS76;4%73#411&#anG2St!@@"
Judging by its tone, this one must be Koji. And the one next to him, squealing more than the others, is probably Omi. Which means that the one next to me is Yoh, though I can no longer see any trace of her once-attractive features. I try my best to ignore the rotten stench of excrement that issues from her quivering flesh.

&e"MVEKNfgda#@%mf@*Fmckxvzm#@SDFzxcv32!!!!"
"GRGHRGWn6Td2Ca15#0m3cHnSkT888###"
"W#BTT?IFW6MKN3LTsk62bFN%@%#$%#!GDF"

Everything has changed. Or almost everything. By some cruel trick of fate, my relationship to the world alone remains the same, as if an insane architect took the blueprints of my life and rebuilt it out of blood and gore. These monsters and I were part of the same college club. We studied together, ate together-we even went skiing together every winter break.

Now these are but painful memories of days that will never return. If only no one recognized me, I might have been able to disconnect myself from the world. It would have been comforting, in comparison, to believe that I had been abducted by aliens, or that I had stumbled through a gateway to hell:
But no, this is beyond a doubt the city where I was born and raised, the society that I was part of for twenty years. Save that I, and I alone, can no longer see it that way. The world as I knew it is gone. I have no place to call home.

"SDJsdafj3t493074t34t#$T#(fjdkfa###"
"TYK#^t3m4T34,Rg4534j&lg45uje@@@"
"FSGf43HG#*$G#G3G#G834g43g8FMA^Л*
Anyway, I can tell that whatever they're discussing is of no importance to me. I decide to keep quiet while pretending to listen.

But just then…

"hEy FuMInoRi," one of the flesh-beasts says as it swivels its bloodshot eyes toward me. "WhAt dO yOU THinK?"
"..About what?"
I try desperately to suppress my loathing and behave normally, but my hoarse voice ruins the attempt.

"UH, WETE TAIKING abOUt THIs YEar'S ski TRiP. YOu'Re COMiNG TOo... RiGHt?
A slimy hole near the top of the creature writhes nauseatingly as it vomits some semblance of words. That must be Koji's face or what I would have seen as such three months ago. Unable to stomach the sight of it, I avert my eyes and give a neutral answer.

“I don’t know.””

"YoU haVe oThEr pLAns?"
"Not really

These were my closest companions. One of them had even wished to be nore.
How many nights have I spent crying in loneliness, lamenting the riends who no longer exist?'

In three months my tears ran dry, and now there is only loathing left in me. Surrounded by hideous creatures that I can only assume are Koji, Omi, and Yoh, I spend each day trying to act as I always have. If I fail at this, I'll surely be sent back to the hospital.Only this time, I'll be locked away forever. No matter what, I won't let
that happen.

"I mEAn... iT's NOt like phYSIcAL acTiVItY COulD AFfect YoUR InJuRIes, RIght?"

"I mEAn... iT's NOt liKe phYSIcAL acTiVItY COulD AFfect YoUR InJuRIeS, Right?"
"I'm not sure. I'll ask the doctor during my check-up."
That's it. I can't look at them or bear their screeching any longer.
I jump to my feet, desperate to escape.

"hEy, fUmiNoRi!"
A spray of stringy slime from the cilia around its voicebox flies at me. I try to cover myself, but too late to keep the slime from splattering across my face like the yolk of a rotten egg. I'm about to lose it. I want to grab a chair, a desk-anything within reach-and use it to smash the life out of this creature, ending it all.

I barely suppress the impulse.
I mustn't let on that something is wrong. However they look to me, this is their world. I'm the outsider here.
"Like I said, today's my check-up. I've got to go."
Struggling to put on a smile, I reach into my wallet, pull out the first bill I find, and put it on the table without even looking at it. I don't care about the change. I just need to get out of here now.
"Later." I mutter hastily, and flee the cafeteria.

I'm not crazy

"Hey," says Takahata Omi, "why don't we go somewhere we can skate for this year's ski trip?"

Isukuba Yoh frowns at the suggestion.
"Skate? But why go to a ski resort to skate?"
"Haha. Give her a break, Tsukuba. It's all she talks about these days.'

Tonoh Koji supports Omi with a laugh. Her impromptu suggestions are nothing new, and it's Koji's role as her boyfriend to provide backup.

They're a good match for each other, Yoh thinks. Sometimes it makes her jealous.

"I mean, she'd seriously never gone skating before I took her the other day."
"Hey! Is it really that strange?"
"Not many people start skating in their twenties, you know."
"I was scared when I was little. Those shoes looked like big knives!"

"But you picked it up just like that? That's pretty amazing, Omi."
"It's a lot like skiing. You keep your weight forward and use the angle of the shoes to steer."
"He made it sound so easy, I figured I should give it a try. And it was Fun!!"

So it was a date. Yoh feels a stab of envy.
Koji and Omi enjoy their time together, as normal lovers do. That's certainly not something that should make her jealous. It's just that her luck in love has been bad.

"Oh... well, I want to see Omi skate too."
Yoh keeps her voice upbeat, trying to cover up her disquiet.

She knows that it's wrong to envy her friends. She too would be spending time with the man she admires, if not for the terrible tragedy that befell him. His is true misfortune. Her "bad luck" doesn't begin to Compare.

"So, how bout it? If we make the next ski trip a skating trip too, it'll be twice as fun!"

"But you can skate at a skating rink, can't you? Why go all the way to a ski resort?"
"I don't want to skate indoors. I want to skate outside, on a lake or Something.

"That sounds fun, but won't it be crowded?"

While speaking, Yoh sneaks a sideways glance at the young man sitting next to her

Although the conversation has involved only three people so far, there are in fact two couples at the cafeteria table. Yoh's boyfriend-though there's still some doubt over whether he could be called that—is beside her, as silent and expressionless as a statue.

"Hey, Fuminori, What do you think?
Perhaps Koji sensed Yoh's pain, in his usual quiet and considerate way.

About what?"
The cause of Yoh's distress-Sakisaka Fuminori-responds to Koji's sudden query with a vague, mumbled question of his own.

"Um, we're talking about this winter's ski trip. You're coming too... Right?""

Koji speaks gingerly, as though probing a tumor. A few months ago, he would not have hesitated to rebuke Fuminori for his attitude. Their long acquaintance had forged a strong and honest friendship. But now…

"I don't know," Fuminori responds bluntly, his downcast eyes and sullen demeanor making it clear that he has no desire to break his silence

"You have plans?"
"Not really.
Even Koji, Fuminori's best friend, cannot communicate with him as before. What hope does Yoh have of breaking through his shell?
The scars left by the events of that late-summer day are still deep all these months later. Each one of the four bears them, not only Fuminori.

"I mean... it's not like physical activity could affect your injuries, right?"
"Not sure. I'll ask the doctor during my check-up."
As though that answer drained the last of his patience, Fuminori bolts out of his chair.

Even Koji can't keep his voice from rising as he tries to stop Fuminori from leaving.

Fuminori reacts swiftly, throwing his hand over his face as though to shield himself from something terrifying. Maybe some spit flew inadvertently from Koji's mouth, but that happens sometimes. Fuminori's reaction is beyond the pale.

"Like I said," Fuminori snaps, making no attempt to relieve the discomfort of his friends, "today's my check-up. I have to go."
Even as he tosses money on the table to pay for his coffee, he acts like he's touching something filthy.

“Latter”

Fuminori stalks out of the cafeteria, almost as if he's running away

Cloaked in heavy silence, the remaining three lower their gaze to the table, where the abandoned ten thousand yen bill sways forlornly. Fuminori's coffee is untouched.

Cloaked in heavy silence, the remaining three lower their gaze to the table, where the abandoned ten thousand yen bill sways forlornly. Fuminori's coffee is untouched.
"I can't take this anymore," Omi says with a sigh, but Koji shakes his head reproachfully.

"Fuminori just needs a little more tíme."
"But it's been three months! What's with his attitude!? I feel like I'm going crazy hanging around him!"
"Hey, I don't understand what he's going through either. I don't think any of us can. Can you imagine losing your whole family like that? That'd screw anyone up."

It could have happened to anyone. A tractor-trailer flipped over on the highway, crushing the Sakisaka family car into twisted scrap. They said it had been difficult to tell the bodies of Fuminori's parents apart.

For a while, it had looked as if there was no hope for Fuminori either. It was nothing short of a miracle that he was able to leave the hospital and return to a normal life.

"He was worse when we went to see him in the hospital, remember? He was terrified of us, like he didn't know who we were. He even had to be tied to the bed, he freaked out so bad. I'm just glad he's made it this far

"There's still something strange about him. What's with the way he ooks at us? It's like we're not even human!"

"Cut it out, Omi," Koji says forcefully, probably less out of empathy for is friend than out of consideration for Yoh.

While Koji's kindness makes her happy, Yoh also knows that she mustn't take advantage of it.
Fuminori is the victim, just as Koji said. He's the one who most deserves sympathy.

Yoh's feelings for Fuminori are her problem, and no one else's. She doesn't blame Fuminori for not giving her an answer after she worked up the courage to ask him out.
In fact, she thinks even more fondly of him for taking the time to consider than she would have had he treated their relationship casually.

Apparently, the fact that Fuminori did not reject her was enough to make them a couple in Koji and Omi's eyes. They've had plenty of fun at Yoh and Fuminori's expense since. The truth of it, though….. is that he still hasn't given her an answer.

After revealing her feelings to him, Yoh didn't see Fuminori again until a week later, and then she could only stare at his broken body through the window of the ICU.

And when he was finally released, after fifty days that seemed an eternity, he was somehow different.
She's starting to doubt that he even remembers what she confessed to him before the accident.

Now winter is coming, and her feelings hang forgotten in the cold,
lonely air.

Chapter 2

Dr. Tanbo Ryoko has never had a more troublesome patient than this young man.

"Has there been any progression since then, Sakisaka-san?"

"No, there..... haven't been any problems to speak of."

His voice is hard and flat, his words tossed carelessly into the air. It is as though he is speaking to himself in an empty room. Even without the training of a psychiatrist, Ryouko can clearly sense the thickness of the wall he has erected between himself and the world.

"Have you experienced nausea, dizziness, or auditory or visual hallucinations?"

"No, nothing."

While Sakisaka appears to be looking at Ryouko, his gaze is actually aimed a fraction down and to the side. He's only superficially engaged in a conversation he has no interest in: perfect rejection.

Realizing that she can't interview him like this, Ryouko sighs and sets aside her chart.

"Sakisaka-san..... The treatment you received at this hospital was the absolute latest in neurosurgery. You know this, correct?"

Elimination of subdural hematoma through the use of micromachines, a treatment available in Japan only at this T University Medical Center, had been the only way to save Sakisaka Fuminori from a cerebral contusion that should have been fatal.

"As it's a brand-new treatment, we're still gathering data on it. This means that it carried risks."

"No doubt."

Sakisaka Fuminori's lips twist slightly in what might be a bitter - or mocking - smile, but it's gone before Ryouko can discern its meaning.

"Normally, it would be be a problem for a doctor to frighten her patient like this, but..... There have been reports of serious brain disorders post-surgery. We must continue to monitor your condition carefully."

This is why he has been coming in for weekly check-ups. Ryouko would like her patient to take them a little more seriously, though.

"How was last week's MRI?" Sakisaka asks abruptly, as though trying to catch Ryouko off guard.

MRI - Magnetic Resonance Imaging - is a way for neurologists to examine the brain in detail without opening the patient's skull. Surprised by Sakisaka's uncommon techical knowledge, Ryouko recalls his profile.

"Oh, that's right. You're a medical student."

"The kind of cerebral dysfunction you're worried about should show up on the MRI, right? Were there any anomalies?"

"......No."

There was nothing, not the slightest problem. For a procedure with such a low rate of success, the results have been miraculous.
However, there is still something bothering Ryouko.

Presuming on what might be a "doctor's instinct," Ryouko believes that there is something wrong with this patient. She can't shake the feeling that he's hiding something beneath his guarded exterior, some terrible weight on his soul - fear, or perhaps suffering.
If it's an inorganic problem, there's nothing she can do as long as he refuses to explain it.

"I'm fine, Doctor. After all, I'm living outside of the hospital with no difficulty. What problem could there be?"

".....You know, Sakisaka-san, continued observation is required after these difficult surgeries. You have to trust us a little more."

"I suppose you're right. I do want to trust you, Doctor. Can I come to you with any problem?"

"Yes, of course," Ryouko answers, smiling to cover up her irritation at being asked exactly the same question as last week.

"Well then, let's pick up where we left off. Doctor, have you learned anything about Professor Ougai?"

Unable to answer, Ryouko hardens the mask of her smile
He asked the same question last appointment, inquiring after someone whom he, an outsider, had no business knowing.

"Professor Ougai..... What does he have to do with your treatment?"

"You just told me to trust you, but now you're keeping secrets?"

There are plenty of patients besides Sakisaka who make things difficult by jumping to conclusions. Ryouko understands that it's not an unnatural reaction when one's life is in question.

In Sakisaka, however, she doesn't see the shortsighted impatience that the other patients exhibit. His calm demeanor makes it seem as though he's questioning a suspect in a crime rather than a doctor.

"He left this hospital some time ago, after all. I never had any contact with him personally....."

"Do you know why he left?"

"Yes, I believe it was personal," Ryouko answers smoothly with no trace of her earlier hesitation. Having decided at the outset to lie, Ryouko has no trouble doing so with a straight face.

"But why are you so fixated on Professor Ougai, Sakisaka-san? Do you know him?"

"Did you know that the Professor has gone missing?"

"No."

Ryouko realizes that her answer was a little too fast. She should have acted more surprised.

"I've recently become close with one of the Professor's relatives, who has asked me to find him."

A relative? Ryouko considers this with a frown.

"I don't believe Professor Ougai had any relatives."

"Oh, who told you that?"

"It was..... a rumor," Ryouko replies, realizing that she had just said earlier that she'd had no contact with him.

"I see. So Professor Ougai was famous enough to have such rumors floating around?"

"Well, he was apparently an unusual man."

"But no one knows why he left the university?"

Ryouko falls silent, knowing that this isn't a topic she can brush away with just a smile.

Sakisaka seems to have finally grasped her mood, however, as his strangely stiff tone softens a little.

"Doctor, I absolutely must find Professor Ougai."

"There's a child who's lost without him. Can't you help me?"

"Isn't this something the police should handle?"

Although she says it like it's nothing, the suggestion is actually a risky gamble. If Ougai Masahiko's disappearance becomes a police matter, the university will likely be investigated. And in order to cover up the mess Ougai left behind, the entire faculty will have to work to dispose of the evidence. And that includes Ryouko herself, of course.

However, Sakisaka isn't likely to ask the police to investigate. First of all, his excuse is clearly a lie. They already made absolutely sure that Ougai Masahiko had no relatives who might come looking for him, which is what allowed them to bury the truth of what happened.

But still..... How did Sakisaka, with no connection to this hospital other than as a patient, learn about Ougai?

"Sakisaka-san, I'm happy to tell you everything I know. However, there's been no word from Professor Ougai since he resigned last April. All I can think of is that he must have gone on a long vacation or something."
".....I see."
Expecting resistance, Ryouko is surprised when Sakisaka backs down.

Nevertheless, she's still worried about his condition. And the mysterious link between him and Ougai Masahiko is only making her more uneasy.
But as long as he doesn't open up to her, there's nothing she can do.
After a brief pause, Ryouko writes "Progress good" on Sakisaka's chart for today.

"About next week's appointment, Sakisaka-san. How does four o'clock again sound——

But before she can finish, Ryouko looks up to see Sakisaka already heading out the door.

It looks like someone sprayed the walls with pig guts from ceiling to floor, but I know that this is the hospital hallway.

What color should the walls of a hospital be? White, of course. It goes without saying that no hospital would ever paint its walls this color. And to the creatures of rotten flesh shambling around me, this hallway probably looks just as white as it should.

I know that the walls are really white, and that the piles of meat are really humans.

I'm the one with the problem, and it's because I've accepted this that I'm able to lead a normal life.
Even if my university's medical department is nowhere near as good as T University's, I'm still a medical student majoring in neurosurgery. I have a basic idea of what has happened to me, though it's hard to believe.

This isn't a pathological condition. It's probably some form of agnosia, or an unknown type of cognitive disorder.
The flesh-beast called Tanbo Ryouko said that there were patients who had developed brain disorders after receiving the same treatment as me. So I guess I'm just another failure. So much for the elite T University Medical School. It makes me want to laugh in that know-it-all doctor's face.

That said, I don't blame the doctors who operated on me. After all, I do owe them my life. I know as well as anyone how low the chance of success was, and that there was no other way to save my life.

What it all comes down to is my bad luck, nothing more.
The point is that my condition isn't treatable like your everyday mental disease.
I have no choice but to live the rest of my life with this disorder. Just like someone adapting to a hearing aid or wheelchair, I must "adapt" to this nauseating scenery.

Of course it's hard. It wasn't easy to resign myself to this fate.
But now there's more than just despair. Even for me, there is a single glimmer of hope.

Keeping my eyes on my feet so as to see as little of this horrifying world as possible, I hurry home.
I live in a quiet suburban neighborhood, in a house that's much too large for me alone. My parents, even unluckier than me, died in the accident three months ago. I couldn't even go to the funeral for being in Intensive Care.

My father's business collapsed, but I was left with the house and enough money to live on for a while.

Of course I'm sad..... but that accident took more from me than just my parents. In fact, being able to live alone and as I please has probably saved me.
If they were still alive, my parents would never have allowed me to live with some strange girl, after all.

"Welcome home!"

As I open the door, a bright voice greets me from the kitchen. Clear as a bell, the voice is undeniably human. The moment it reaches my ears, it flushes the day's terrible voices and discordant sounds from my memory.

"I'm home, Saya."

Even the patter of feet coming down the hallway is music to my ears. Nowhere else in the city can I hear such footsteps. Only in this house, with Saya, am I so privileged.

"You're late. I was a little worried."

"Sorry. I had to stop by the hospital today."

"Oh, that was today?"

In her smile - in the quizzical tilt of her head - is everything that I have lost.

Since my accident, this girl is the only person I've met - perhaps the only person in the world - who does not trigger my cognitive disorder.
True, her skin seems too white, and the color of her eyes and hair is probably different in reality. Even so, her form is clearly, undeniably human.
And it's not just her appearance. Even her voice, and her——

As I bend down to take off my shoes, Saya, as always, wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me gently into her tiny bosom.
Her skin feels truly human, neither cold nor slimy, and from her hair wafts the sweet fragrance of a young girl.
In all the world, only Saya is pleasing to my five senses.

And what's more, she smiles at me - embraces me.
She knows that she is my salvation, and for some reason is happy that I need her.

If I had not met her - if I had been all alone in this twisted, filth-ridden world - I would no doubt have quickly succumbed to true madness. It is no exaggeration to say that Saya alone is keeping me alive.

"Worked on the living room. The painting is half done! And now I'm making your dinner like I learned from the TV."

"Sounds good."

"It'll take a little longer. Can you wait?"

"Sure. I'll do some more work in the living room."

After watching the humming Saya return to the kitchen, I enter the living room.

I realized one day that, if the natural colors of the world are sickening, all I have to do is paint them over with colors that seem pleasant. After I bought every kind of paint in the hardware store, Saya and I started trying out different combinations.

It should go without saying that, after painting the bedroom from ceiling to floor, I was finally able to get my first good night's sleep since the accident.

When we first started on the living room, Saya, unsure what to do with the curtains, had just painted carefully around the windows. Without hesitating, I tore the curtains down and painted over the window glass itself.

There'll never be anything out there that I'd want to see, and if we keep the rain-shutters down the neighbors probably won't think anything of it.

"Dinner's ready!"
"Can you bring it in here?"

As she enters the living room carrying a food tray, Saya sniffs the air.
"Does the paint smell bother you?"

Now that she mentions it, I suppose that the smell of paint thinner must be building up in this closed room. It doesn't really bother me, though. There are far worse smells outside.

"No, I'm fine if you are."

Saya sets the food on the table. Unfortunately, neither its color nor its smell is at all appetizing. Not that eating elsewhere is any different.

"Thanks for the food."

As has become my custom, I steel myself and methodically transport the food into my mouth.

The taste is as gut-wrenching as I expected, but it's not Saya's fault. I'm sure she made it exactly like the cooking show said. It's just that my taste buds can't accept it.

"......It's not good?"
"Umm..... Well, no....."

Lying about these things won't make Saya happy. She knows about my condition.

"Don't worry about it. I'll make something different tomorrow."

"Sorry..... You always go to the trouble of cooking, but I....."

"It's fine. If I keep trying, maybe I'll find something you'll like."

In my current state, eating is nothing more than an unwelcome duty. As much as I hate it, I have to do it to survive.

If I stay alive, then perhaps one day, as Saya says, I'll be able to eat something delicious again. I met Saya, didn't I?

"Are you going to eat?"
"No, I..... already ate."

Even after we started living together, Saya has never once eaten with me. I don't know why she refuses to do so, and it makes me a little sad, but I'm not about to force her.

After all, she's putting up with all the eccentricities that are a result of my warped senses.

"By the way, I asked about your father at the hospital again today."

"About Dad?"

Ougai Masahiko, Saya's father, is her only relative and a professor at the T University Medical School. Saya has asked me to unravel the mystery of his disappearance.

"Like I thought, they wouldn't tell me anything. But I get the feeling they're hiding something....."

"——Oh."

I expected Saya to be a little more dejected.

"......Aren't you worried about him?"

"No," Saya responds with an unreadable expression, "it's not that."

She gives a little shake of her head, then smiles at me once again.

"Thanks for all you're doing for me, Fuminori."

"You're doing much more for me."

I thank her for the meal and set my chopsticks down next to the perfectly clean plates. No matter how it tasted, thinking of the emotion that Saya put into it gave me the strength to finish it.

"Will you take a bath now?"
"Yeah. Will you wash my back again?"
"Yeah!"

Ever since Saya moved in, it's been like having a new wife.

Saya——
Why are you so good to me.....

"Ahh.....haaa....."

Saya's slender hips bounce up and down like an insatiable flywheel, each descent thrusting my hard desire deep into the embrace of her hot, tight womb.

"Yes, yessss..... Good.....ahh.....hot.....deeper.....!"

Who could imagine that her slender, seemingly incorruptible body would ever glisten with the hot sweat of passion, or feast on pleasure with such bottomless lust?

Saya, my darling Saya —— Is this really what you want?
Why do you go so far? What am I, that you can give yourself to me body and soul?

"Fuminoriiiii, more..... harder..... it's so deep..... ahhhhhh!"

Or is this merely sympathy? Do you pity me, the exile from society? Is that enough for you to surrender yourself to such mad passion? Are you so wanton?

"Fuminori..... Yessss..... please..... give me more, more.....! going mad..... uhhhh!"

As she rides hungrily atop me, she gazes down at me with a bewitching smile and eyes that are utterly devoid of twisted or sinful desire . There are only the melting flames of ecstasy.
Her beautiful, carnal moans and twisting body seem impossible, dreamlike —— and I can't help but wonder if even the pleasure that is burning me from head to toe is but an illusion.

Needing to touch her, to reassure myself that she's real, I raise my hands to her small breasts and seize them like my life depends on it.

"Hyaaaa!"

Saya immediately convulses, screaming like an animal.
As I roll her sharp, pink nipples through my fingers, she throws her head back and gasps for air.

"Ahhhhh, yes..... Fuminori..... I'm going to pieces.....!"

Saya is here with me now, but I can only be sure of it for this moment. Only when I am joined with her can I believe.

"Fuminoriiii..... Inside..... Please, come inside..... I want you in me....."

I nod and accelerate the pace of my thrusts. Saya's gasps rise in pitch as her mad dance of passion reaches its peak.

"I'm coming!! Fuminori! Together..... Togetheeeeer!"

No matter what cruel fate might await me, Saya —— there is nothing I fear more than losing you.

"Aahhhhhh!"

As Saya climaxes, convulsing and wailing, I give in to her tight embrace and unleash my boiling hot seed into her womb.

"Ahhhh..... So hot..... Fuminori....."

Saya collapses atop me, still smiling, and I wrap my arms around her. The feeling of her soft, sweat-soaked skin and the warmth emanating from her body reassure me that she is still

here.

"......Fuminori? Are you crying?"

I realize that my cheeks are wet with tears.

"——Why, Saya? Why do you go so far for me?"
」
"Fuminori....."

"I don't understand, but still..... I'm losing myself to you more and more. Soon I won't be able to live without you."

I wrap my arms tighter around Saya, praying that our bodies will melt together and never again be apart.

"Tell me, please..... How can I keep you with me? What must I do? How can I repay you?"

"......Keep holding me," Saya whispers lovingly into my chest.

"I want you to make love to me. I want to stay like this forever. I won't leave you, Fuminori."

"Why —— Why me?"

"Because you're all alone, of course."

Still in my embrace, Saya gazes up into my eyes.

"And..... because I was alone too."

"You're all I have too. In this whole world, only you will embrace me —— my precious Fuminori."

Now I know.
No matter how horrifying the world becomes to me, all I'll ever need is Saya.

Yoh is determined to talk to him today. Nothing will happen as long as she continues to hesitate, and putting it off will only make her suffering last longer.
It's time to show courage once again.

Yoh's fourth period on Thursdays is biology, and this is her one chance to see Fuminori.

Because it's a required course with many students, the lecture is held in a large hall that can seat over two hundred. But since the room is usually only about half full, it's rarely difficult for

Yoh to find the seat she wants.

Yoh prefers to sit near the center, where it's easiest to hear the professor. Most of the students congregate in this area for the same reason.
Fuminori usually sits next to her, although it's not always possible when there's no seat available. Yoh has resigned herself to this as representing the distance still between them, but they still always try to sit as close as possible.

The classroom isn't crowded today, so Yoh is able to set her bag on the seat next to her without bothering anyone.

When the professor arrives at the usual time to start class, however, there's still no sign of Fuminori.

After waiting for about ten minutes, Yoh furtively casts her glance around the room.

He's there. Fuminori must have come in without her noticing, because he's sitting alone in the far back corner of the room.
Did he miss Yoh when he came in? No, that's impossible. In the first place, no serious student would willingly sit in such an inconvenient place.

Feeling miserable, Yoh slides her bag back over to herself.

Fuminori is out the door the moment class ends, and Yoh barely manages to catch up to him before he disappears down the hallway.

"Sakisaka-san!"

At the sound of his name, Fuminori stiffens as though he was just bellowed at.

"......What is it?" he turns to her and says, though he seems reluctant to do so.

Now that they're face to face, Yoh is painfully aware of how much weight Fuminori has lost. His sunken eyes and protruding cheekbones are a far cry from the features familiar to her. She wonders whether he's under a lot of stress, or perhaps not getting enough nutrition. Maybe it's both.

He looks more tense than he should be; like he's irritated, or even frightened of something. His eyes move restlessly from point to point, and he refuses to look Yoh in the eye.
Just looking at him makes Yoh's chest ache with sadness. What could have changed him so?

she reminds herself, relighting the flame of courage in her heart.

"Um, I have something to talk to you about. Do you..... have some time?"

The courtyard is empty and silent, no one willing to sit on a bench and chat in the cold November air.

"So what is it?"

Don't you remember? Yoh almost blurts out, but she manages to keep herself from being so blunt.

"Sakisaka-san, you've been acting strange recently. I'm..... worried about you."

"Maybe you're right. A lot's happened, after all."

He smiles like it's nothing, but even that seems stiff and forced.
He's even standing precisely one pace farther away than he used to while talking to her.

"Is that really all?"

"Do you think there's something more?"

Yoh manages to keep from flinching at the hardness in his voice.

"It's like..... you're struggling with something."

Rather than answer, Sakisaka grinds his toe into the dead grass at his feet. Fearing that her determination might flag, Yoh lets the words come as they may.

"It's like you're trying to bear some unimaginable weight, but the struggle is breaking you..... That's how you look to me."

"Oh really," Fuminori mutters through clenched teeth, no longer even trying to deny it or change the topic. This brush-off is an even clearer signal of rejection than his earlier evasiveness.
But Yoh's determination is strong. Today, at least, she won't back down.

"It's times like these," she implores, trying to convey the sincerity of her feelings for him, "that you need your friends."

"I really feel bad about what happened to your family. But..... you're not alone. You have Tonoh-kun, and Oumi-chan, and——you have me."

Yoh can no longer stop the words from pouring out. She fears that if she does not release all of the myriad emotions pent-up inside her, they will be lost forever.

"I think we can help you, so that you don't have to carry everything by yourself."

"Even if we can't do anything, talking to us might make you feel a little better."

"I want to help you, Sakisaka-san! The others all feel the same——"

"Stop it!" Fuminori shouts, silencing Yoh's entreaty.

She had promised herself that she wouldn't back down, but Fuminori's expression was terrible enough to shatter her resolve.

The look in his eyes is not anger, or any other warm-blooded emotion. It is hate - murderously cold hate.

"Oh yeah, I just remembered that I still haven't given you an answer."

He remembers. He remembers, yet still he has treated her with such coldness.
That alone is more than enough of an answer for Yoh. If his words tear her heart to shreds any further, she won't be able to bear it.

"I never saw you in any particularly special way before. When you expressed your feelings for me, I wasn't sure how to respond. I didn't know how I really felt about you, after all."

"Sakisaka-san....."
"But now I can give you a clear answer. I've had plenty of time to think it over, you know.
——Tsukuba-san, I hate you. I don't even want to look at you."

I mustn't cry, Yoh tells herself, but too late to stop the tears pouring from her eyes.

"I suppose it's too much to hope that I never see you again. We do go the same school. So would you mind at least never talking to me again? I'm quite sick of you."

"How can you be so....." Yoh inadvertantly whispers,< to which Fuminori twists his lips into a horribly cruel smile.

"You should calm down a little, seriously. I bet you were just egged on by Oumi and Kouji, right? You can play at having a crush all you want, but leave me out of it."

That's all Yoh can take.

Even after shedding tears in front of him, she absolutely refuses to let him hear her cry. Any disgrace would be preferable to breaking down here.

So she runs, fleeing breathlessly from the courtyard with Fuminori smiling coldly at her back.

Oumi was the first to catch sight of Yoh and Fuminori leaving for the courtyard.
Reluctant to interrupt them, but still unwilling to leave them alone, Kouji and Oumi ended up watching the whole thing from the shadows.

"That asshole....."

Throughout the exchange, Oumi was clearly itching to jump out and punch Fuminori in the face. Knowing her temper, Kouji kept firm hold of her sleeve until the end. If he hadn't, she might very well have done it.

Fuminori leaves after Yoh, his every step seeming to take an act of willpower. Kouji sighs heavily into the once more empty courtyard, but the bitter taste in his throat won't go away.

"What's wrong with him....."

Even for Kouji, Fuminori's treatment of Yoh is unforgivable. However, the first thing that he feels is confusion.
Kouji and Fuminori are old friends, having known each other since before college. As far as Kouji knows, Fuminori has never been so cruel before.
There's no question that the accident changed him.

"Kouji, are you going to just let this go?"
"I don't want to, but what can we do?"
"Something better than peeping!" Oumi shouts, clearly infuriated.

"I won't be satisfied until I give him a piece of my mind."
"That won't make Tsukuba feel better."

"But it'll at least make me feel better!"

Yoh and Oumi are best friends, just like Kouji and Fuminori, and it was the relationship between Kouji and Oumi that brought Fuminori and Yoh together. Just as it is natural for Oumi to be worried about her friend, it is also natural for her to be angry with Fuminori.

"I'm going to talk to Sakisaka-kun by myself. You don't have to come."

"......You serious?"

"You go take care of Yoh. She's probably really hurt..... After she's finished crying, she'll need someone to be nice to her."

"Wait, shouldn't we switch jobs?"

"You know my personality. If I try to comfort her, I'll just end up making it a lot worse."

"......Yeah, you have a point."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Anyway, just don't go too far."

Ending the conversation before Oumi's mood gets any worse, Kouji heads off to find Yoh.

I feel awful, miserable - but also refreshed.
I've finally crossed the line.

I knew it would come crashing down like this sooner or later. Having become unable to feel anything but disgust for other people, there was no way I could hope to maintain the relationships I'd had before the accident.

Today's incident will definitely get back to Kouji and Oumi, and everyone will be convinced that Sakisaka Fuminori has had a major change of character. Honestly, I don't care any more. At least I probably won't be institutionalized for this. I just need to avoid acting any stranger than I already have.

If this puts a rift between me and the others, good. Just thinking about the stress I'll avoid makes me feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I'm fed up with them sticking their noses into my life. It's like they don't care that they make my gut turn just by being near me.

I've been terrified of them until now, but today struck fear into one of them. On one hand, thinking about this is a relief..... But I'm not entirely without remorse for what happened.
The person I just chased off with the verbal equivalent of a nuclear bomb used to be my friend Yoh. Even if my senses don't believe it, my mind accepts the theory. I don't have any particular grudge against Yoh herself, and I didn't want to hurt her.

In retrospect, perhaps I should have just outright refused to talk to her.

Yoh —— She was an attractive woman, and I certainly didn't think badly of her. To be honest, though, I was annoyed when Kouji and Oumi tried to stick us together for the fun of it. It felt like I was being toyed with, and Yoh seemed totally oblivious to the fact that she was dancing to their tune. Her cluelessness was irritating.

That said, I knew that none of them meant any harm. Back then, I didn't have any reason to hurt others just to get my way. If having a casual relationship with Yoh would keep our circle of friends together, I was willing to make that compromise.

Now, however, there's no room in my heart for the tolerance necessary to just go with the flow.
If merely talking to someone is an unbearable ordeal, how can I be expected to show kindness?

These ruminations have left me exhausted. I want to return to Saya as soon as possible, but thinking about the packed trains and crowded downtown streets between here and home saps my will.
Catching sight of a nearby bench, I sit down and close my eyes to the horrors of the world. I can't do anything about the stink or the noise, but at least I can manage to calm my nerves enough to rest.

When I regained consciousness in the T University hospital ward, the world was as dark as it is now.
I hadn't regained my sight, even though my eyes and optical nerves were fine.
It must have been an aftereffect of the accident.

Blindness was a shock, but now I know that my suffering then was nothing. After all, my senses of hearing, touch, taste, and smell were all fine at the time.
The real tragedy began when my sight returned.

The one small mercy was that I was able to come to terms with the terrible accident and my neurosurgery while still blind.

I panicked when I first saw the nightmarish hospital and the bloodcurdling shapes of the doctors and nurses, but I soon guessed the cause.
It chills me to think of what might have happened if I had recovered my sight along with my consciousness. Suddenly awakening in what can only be described as Hell, I would have no doubt lost my mind instantly.

Soon my disorder spread to the senses of touch, taste, and smell. In the human sensory structure, sight is far more powerful than any of the other senses.
The taste of my food, the feel of my bedsheets, the fragrance of my get-well flowers —— all became as unbearably foul as my eyes said they should be.

Eventually, when even the voices of the doctors became unrecognizable as human, I decided to kill myself. I didn't believe for a second that I could come to terms with this new world.

At least, not until I met Saya.

One night when I was trying to think of a painless way to die, I found myself succumbing to sleep.
Drifting between the nightmares in my dreams and the nightmare of reality, I didn't notice her enter my room.

Suddenly there was a face staring curiously down at me from next to my bed.
The face was not covered in pus, slime, or earthworm-like feelers. It had smooth white cheeks, round eyes, a lovely little nose..... all things I had never expected to see again. The

face was that of a girl, undeniably human and positively glowing with beauty.

"Ahh——" I sighed in admiration, savoring the first peace and joy since regaining my sight.

Apparently, she had not expected such a reaction.

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

Looking at the clock, I saw that it was exactly three in the morning, not a time for a young girl to be wandering around a hospital. Even someone with no imagination would likely have thought her a ghost.
I, however, wouldn't have cared if she had been a ghost. Either way, she was a godsend.

"Who——are you? Why are you here——?"

"I'm Saya. I'm looking for my dad."

I assumed that she was the daughter of one of the night-shift nurses or other patients. It was unusual, but not unthinkable for such a child to be wandering around. Rather, it was the hospital security's fault for not locking the doors properly.

"It's no fun if you're not scared."

"Wait——!" I cried, desperate to keep her from leaving. It was only after she turned around that I realized I hadn't thought of what to do next.

"Well?"

Her eyes drew me into their depths, healing my soul to its core. Through the white haze clouding my mind, I struggled to form a coherent sentence.

"......I shouldn't do this to a girl, but you're the only one I can ask....."

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No longer concerned with propriety, I let the words come pouring out of my mouth.

"Will you..... let me hold your hand?"

Saya first looked confused, but then smiled like she'd just found a new toy. Her smile was like the sun.

"You're strange," she said, holding out her slender white hand. "No one's ever asked me anything like that."

Ever so carefully, as though catching snowflakes in my hand, I placed my palm against hers.

I could clearly feel her human warmth and the softness of her delicate fingers. She was there, just beyond the palm of my hand.

Thinking back on the joyful tears I shed then, I know that that was the moment I was saved from my fate.

"This is the first time in half a month that I've touched someone and..... felt them as human."

"I can't touch anyone else. I was in an accident, and as an aftereffect..... I can't see people as human."
"Hmm..... how mysterious."

"You're interesting," she said, winding her fingers gently around mine. "Can I come back tomorrow night?"

"Yes, of course! But..... are you alright with that?"
"Sure. The night belongs to me."

And so our nightly rendezvous began.
Saya came to my room every night at 3 A.M., skillfully taking advantage of the duty nurse's shift-change.
I was astonished to learn that she was living in hiding inside the hospital.

"It's so big that I never run out of hiding places," she said, answering my surprise with a nonchalant smile.

She told me that she had been living in the suburbs with her father, a doctor teaching at the hospital, but had found herself all alone when one day he stopped coming home.

After tiring of waiting for her father at home, Saya had decided one night to sneak into the hospital, where she'd lived for over two months while searching for his whereabouts.

"No, Dad taught me everything I need to know. I'm really smart, you know."

She was a strange girl. While she looked and talked like an innocent child, she also had the ability to hide from adults and feed herself. Perhaps her lack of common sense was due to her youth, but the sharp intelligence and deep knowledge she periodically exhibited were not those of a child.

But such minor things were of no concern to me. To me, Saya was the only other human in a world gone mad. Her existence meant far more to me than the standards of society.

"Isn't it dangerous here? Have you ever thought you might be found?"

"Nope, never. I don't have to worry about finding food here, and it's a lot more fun than staying in Dad's house by myself."

"I looked through the patient lists and found the ones who have mental problems," Saya continued, grinning mischievously. "Sometimes I sneak into their rooms late at night and scare them. Even if they raise a big fuss, no one believes what mental patients say. They just brush it off as a bad dream."

Her confession reminded me that the hospital was famous for its ghost stories.
Who could have imagined that there was actually a real girl impishly roaming these hallways?

"So that's why you came to my room at first?"

"Yeah. ——Sorry, are you mad?"

While her pranks were hardly praiseworthy, I couldn't bring myself to scold her for the very thing that had brought us together.

"You shouldn't do it anymore. Will you come talk to me at night instead?"

"Yeah! That's more fun for me, too!"

With extreme care, I was able to conceal my sensory disorder.
It was glaringly obvious that the doctors had no way to cure me, and the fact that I had just undergone a new treatment clearly still in the trial-and-error stage made me even more cautious.

How much interest would the doctors show in a patient exhibiting such an unusual side effect? As a medical student, it was easy for me to imagine the clinical coldness of the researchers. For the sake of my dignity, I was not about to become a pitiful guinea pig.

And so I hid my everyday discomfort and loathing behind a mask of normalcy, convincing the doctors that any signs of stress were merely a result of hospitalization.
Saya was my support. Looking forward to her nightly visits was the only thing that gave me the strength to overcome my daily torture.
Having hope can make an enormous difference in a patient's progress. With the aid of my secret nurse, I recovered at a pace that left the doctors stunned.

On the last night before my release, I summoned my courage and asked her, "Are you——going to stay in this hospital forever?"

"Yeah. I couldn't learn anything about my Dad, but I don't have anywhere else to go. I guess I'll stay as long as I can hide."

In other words, she had no reason to stay either.

I decided to take the plunge, timidly asking,"Why not..... stay at my house?"

"My family's gone, so I have plenty of rooms. You won't need to hide, and it's not a bad place to live——"

"You want me to live with you?"

I didn't have the courage to ask her what she thought of that, so I hastily offered a deal.

"In exchange, I'll help you look for your father! I'll find him no matter what!"

"......I think that'll be hard," Saya said, looking a little embarassed.

"Dad probably did something bad and had to leave the hospital. We can't get the police involved. You'll have to be as discrete as possible."
"I'll do whatever it takes! I——"

Unable to control myself, I finally spoke the truth.

"——I don't want to be apart from you."

At first she looked bewildered, but, after considering it, she said, "......Give me a little time to think."

That said, she left my room earlier than usual.

On the day of my release, I managed to smile as I accepted the hideous, foul-smelling celebratory bouquet.

The flesh-beasts calling themselves Kouji, Yoh, and Oumi came to pick me up. They had come to see me any number of times during my stay, but it never got easier to see my old friends changed so horribly.
My sudden tears of despair drew suspicion, but I managed to explain them away as tears of joy.

As we walked through to Kouji's car through the halls, lobby, and parking lot, I desperately averted my eyes from the grotesque world and looked for Saya. But she was nowhere to be seen.

I stared through the car window at the hospital fading in the distance, praying for a last glimmer of hope.
But Saya never appeared.
After Kouji and the others dropped me off in front of the house I'd grown up in, I took another look at my surroundings.
I'd never moved, having lived my entire life in this one house. There had been no other place for me to call home, but now —— everything had mercilessly changed.

As I walked from the gate to the front door, I looked over the garden and trees. I had many memories of childhood there, and I could feel them being defiled by the twisted, festering shapes before me.

There was nothing familiar left in the house, nothing to evoke fond memories. What I had once called home was now a whole other world.

"......I have no home," I whispered with a smile of self-pity.

Ascending to the second floor, I found my room utterly unrecognizable.
And sitting on the bed, curled up like an abandoned cat, was Saya.
As I stood there in shock, she looked timidly up at me and in a tiny, weak voice said, "Can I..... really stay?"

I responded by sweeping her into my arms, embracing her tightly so that she wouldn't escape.

Saya did not resist.

Having arrived in front of the Sakisaka house, Oumi takes a deep breath to calm her nerves.
Her anger doesn't abate, of course, but she knows that it won't help to be so enraged that she can't even say what she came to say.

While waiting for a response from the intercom, she looks over the patch of yard that she can see from outside the gate.

Even Oumi isn't sensitive enough to complain about other people's housekeeping, but this is beyond the pale.
The grass is growing wildly, and there are piles of dead leaves everywhere. It doesn't just look untended; it looks like an uninhabited ruin.

It's still light out, but every window has its rain shutters tightly sealed. Oumi guesses that they weren't just shut early, but have been closed since morning.

Just what kind of life is he leading? Even if he no longer has a family, this level of negligence is going too far.
And is it just her imagination, or does something stink like rotten meat? It couldn't be coming from the yard, could it?

There's still no response, so she presses the buzzer again, and again, and again. Finally, after this has gone on for over ten minutes, Oumi loses her patience and opens the cover of the intercom.<se id="1" src="カバー開け" mode="normal" loop="off">

As she expected, the power has been disconnected.
Maybe Fuminori cares more about not being bothered by newspaper deliveries or solicitors than about receiving the rare guest, but, regardless, Oumi doesn't presume to know his motivations. With her anger reignited by what she can only see as a lack of respect for others, she roughly pushes open the gate and stomps through the yard to the front door.

Given the state of his intercom, she doubts that Fuminori will respond to a knock, so Oumi decides to simply open the door and go in shouting. And, if the door is locked, she'll just have to.....

Surprisingly, the doorknob turns easily in her hand, and the enraged Oumi finds herself throwing the door open wider than she intended.

Her nostrils are instantly assaulted by a choking stench.

.....Eh? W-what is this.....?

As Oumi stands petrified, the cowbell hanging on the inside of the door chimes loudly, probably alerting Fuminori to the presence of a visitor——

"Welcome home!"

Oumi can't believe the voice she just heard coming from the room at end of the hall. It was clearly inhuman, yet its intonation was too complex to have been made by an animal.

"——Is someone there?

There is no response.
Instead, she hears the squishy sound of something soft and wet flopping its way deeper into the house.

Finding it difficult to place a meaningful image to the voice she just heard, Oumi stares blankly at the empty vestibule. There's nothing inside..... not even Fuminori's shoes, which can only mean that he's still outside somewhere, wearing them.

If Fuminori isn't home, the house should be empty.
Then——what was that noise just now?

Her anger has vanished as if it were never there. Leaving the door open so that the cowbell won't ring, Oumi sets foot into the hallway.

The floor creaks, setting her nerves on edge. Oumi herself isn't sure why she's sneaking around like a burglar, but something tells her to make as little noise as possible.

The potency of the stink inside the house makes the whiff she caught outside pale in comparison. It's sickening, like piles of fish guts have been left to rot. Has food been left to spoil in the kitchen? She also notices a sound coming from the end of the hallway.

Stepping gingerly on the creaking floorboards, Oumi makes her way to the end of the hallway. She finds rooms to both sides of her - one lit, the other dark - and chooses to look into the lit room.

It's the kitchen, lit by what must be the only window in the house not covered by a storm shutter.

The sound she heard was the pot boiling on the stove, and on the chopping board next to it lie a butcher's knife and some half-diced carrots. A perfectly normal household scene, with the light of the setting sun making everything the color of overripe, decomposing fruit.

There is something terribly wrong, of course. Who was cooking here? And just where did they go?

"Is anyone here?" Oumi calls, regretting it immediately as she realizes that her voice is shaking uncontrollably.
As her words echo vainly through the silent house, she begins to feel foolish and defenseless.

Suddenly she feels something cold seeping through her stockings.

She timidly reaches down to touch her feet, her fingertips coming away covered with a viscous, olive green slime.
The slime is like the filthy water from a tank long clogged with algae and dead fish, and the whole floor is covered with it. It must be the source of the stench.

Oumi wishes that she had worn her shoes inside - manners are now the farthest thing from her mind.

When she looks back ruefully the way she came, she realizes that her current position is not visible from the entrance. This kitchen must be where that strange voice and those sounds of movement came from.

.....The next room must be the den. As she expected from having seen the storm shutters

closed, it's pitch black inside.

Oumi wants nothing more than to turn around and leave the house, but that would mean turning her back to the darkness of that room - something which she cannot bring herself to do.

Moved less by reason than by some irrational compulsion, Oumi sets foot into the living room.

It is too dark to see anything, and the stink is far worse than ever before.
She slides her hand along the wall, feeling for the light switch. Finding it much faster than she expected, she flips it on like it's her last hope.

Colors. So many colors.
The purple of entrails, the brown of rotten meat, the crimson of fresh blood, the yellow of fat -- these colors, and yet more that cannot be described, join in a maddening array to cover every inch of the walls, floor, windows, and ceiling.
It's like a painter went over the room with megalomaniacal precision, leaving not the tiniest portion untouched. The colors say all that needs to be said about the painter's hate, malice, and insanity.

Oumi's legs give out from the shock, sending her to the floor. The slime covering the floor immediately soaks her jeans, its cold tendrils creeping up her legs, crotch, and.....

Her neck.
Her hand flies to her neck, where it is greeted by another drop of chilly slime.
It's above her. Something is dripping down on her head.

Making perhaps the worst decision of her entire life, Oumi looks up.
The predator clinging to the ceiling, mere moments from leaping upon its prey - she sees it in every detail.

Her mouth and nose are sealed before she can scream, and her belly is torn open as something enters to feast on her innards.
By the time she feels any of this, Oumi has already gone mad.

I bit the bullet and tried to take the train, but the rush hour crowds were so bad that I had to get off halfway and walk.
I'm running pretty late. I wonder if Saya's worried. I just hope she's not mad.

When I enter the yard, I realize that the front door has been left wide open.
Light from the living room is seeping out into the hallway, and I hear what sounds like someone smacking their lips. And..... there's a tantalizing fragrance in the air.
Is it Saya? I consider calling out to her, but decide to enter in silence instead.

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Something smells strange, but not at all unpleasant. The aroma is quite soothing, in fact; it somehow reminds me of Saya's hair.

At first I am surprised by what I see in the living room.
The floor is covered with what looks to be some kind of grass - probably the source of the herblike smell - and there are fruit or vegetable-like balls of various sizes scattered everywhere.

"Saya?"
"Ah——"

Saya turns around, her eyes wide with surprise. She then looks away sheepishly, like a child caught at some prank.

"What are you eating?"
"This is, um, well——" she stammers, so flustered that I feel bad for her.

Remembering that she has never eaten in front of me before, I realize that she must be quite embarassed. I suddenly feel like I've done something awful, as if I'm a lowlife peeping tom.

"Can I have one?"

I scoop up the closest fruit-thing and pop it into my mouth, ignoring Saya's attempt to wave me off.

It has a strange texture.
It feels soft and pliable, like a peach or pear. When I bite into it with my back teeth, a succulent juice fills my mouth, combined with a sharp, strong fragrance; it's unlike anything I've ever tasted.

"How did you prepare this? Did you use any seasoning?"

"It wasn't that complicated..... I just took it apart and then melted it a little to make it easier to eat. It's practically raw."
"Oh?"

I pick up a different lump, this one consisting of fruity flesh encasing a hard core. Tearing a chunk off in my mouth, I find that it has a similar taste to the last one.

"Hey, are you okay? That's a——"
"Yeah, even I can eat this. In fact, it's good!"

"——Really?"

At first, Saya looks dumbstruck, but soon she starts laughing mirthfully.

"Aha! Oh, so this is what you like! Now I feel stupid for going to all that trouble."

"Is this what you always eat, Saya?"
"Yeah, though it's been a while since I've had one so big. I usually catch them in places like the nearby park."

There's an impressive nature preserve not too far from here. I've never heard anything about fruits like these growing there, but..... well, of course. They only look like fruits to me - they're really something else.

"Sorry, I already ate all the best parts."
"That's okay. There's always next time, and this means that we can eat together from now on."
"Yeah!"

Saya seems really happy. I'm happy too, of course. Eating with someone is much more fun than eating alone, and it makes the food taste better too.

"There's still plenty left, and it'll keep chilled for two or three days. It won't taste as good, though."
"Then we'd better start putting it away."

Sealing the small fruits in tupperware and the large ones in pots and bowls, Saya and I store the remaining food in the refrigerator. Thinking of tomorrow's dinner fills me with anticipation.

Together with Saya, I feel that I'm beginning to regain the joy of living little by little.
Saya will guide me. With her, I can live on.

True Scaaaary Stories: Hospital Edition
Chapter 4: The Monster in the University Hospital

Elite university hospital research student K-san relates his shocking experiences! Will you believe him or not?

Strange things started happening at our hospital around the end of last spring.
Many times, patients would wake in the middle of the night screaming about nightmares. They all said that they had seen something unbelievably terrifying in their dreams, and many of them had to be sedated before they would sleep again. Some patients even transferred to other hospitals because of it.

The weird thing was that all of the patients had had exactly the same dream - a dream about some horribly disgusting monster standing by their bed and staring down at them.....

But the really strange stuff started happening after that.
There used to be a lot of stray cats hanging around the campus, looking for scraps from the students.
One day, the cats suddenly started disappearing, and it wasn't that they'd stopped coming. It was more like they'd vanished from the area entirely.

And then people stopped walking their dogs around. According to rumors, it wasn't that the owners were taking their dogs elsewhere, but that the dogs were refusing to go anywhere near the school.
Eventually, things started going missing in the hospital.

Organs, to be precise.

Organs that had been harvested for transplants kept disappearing from where they were being stored. Some people even came close to losing their jobs over it. And it wasn't just two or three times that it happened. They tried to keep it from the research students, but we heard that it was a lot worse than that.

People started spreading rumors that there was something living in the hospital.
The janitors would find strange messes that could only have been made in the middle of the night: traces of something that had crawled down the hallway, or weird stains on the walls that seemed to be caused by something dripping through the ceiling.
Lots of the late-shift nurses talked about hearing strange noises on the same days that patients had screamed about nightmares.

There's one last story, one you can never mention inside the hospital.
One day, the obstetrics department went totally crazy.
They said that a newborn had disappeared in the night.

If it were true, the police would've come and it would've been all over the news, but they say the big shots managed to make it all go away. It's just a rumor, of course.

These strange incidents suddenly stopped towards the end of the summer.
Now there are almost no patients complaining of nightmares, and the cats have started coming back to campus.
But, still, what happened in the hospital that summer? Even now, just thinking about it gives me the creeps.

This is the third day that they haven't been able to get in touch with Oumi.
There's no sign of her having returned to her apartment, and even her family doesn't know anything. Her parents have already filed a missing persons report.

"Well, you know her. She'll probably just pop up somewhere like nothing happened."
"......Yeah, I hope so....." Yoh replies with a gloomy expression. She's worried about Oumi, of course, but the incident with Fuminori three days ago must still be weighing on her mind as well.

Yoh hasn't seen Fuminori since then, and Fuminori hasn't made any effort to approach them. Four people used to meet in this cafeteria between classes, but now there are only two.

"Hey, Tonoh-kun, let's keep thinking. Isn't there somewhere Oumi-chan might have gone?"
"No....." Kouji answers evasively, "I checked them all already."

It's a lie, of course. Kouji knows where Oumi planned to go that evening, but he doesn't want to bring Fuminori up in front of Yoh.

Their awkward silence is mercifully broken by the bell signaling the start of the next period.

"Well, I've gotta go."

"......Yeah."

If Kouji isn't mistaken, Yoh is supposed to have class next period too, but she continues to sit there like she's in a trance.
Unable to come up with anything to say, he reluctantly leaves the cafeteria.
Both Oumi's disappearance and Yoh's depression worry Kouji, and both problems lead back to the exact same place.

What the hell is Fuminori doing.....?

When Oumi went missing, the first thing Kouji did was question Fuminori. The last time he'd seen Oumi was just before she'd stormed off to give Fuminori a piece of her mind, after all.

Fuminori had responded with blunt, unequivocal denial, and had acted as though he hadn't the slightest idea why Oumi would have gone to his house. Perhaps that was only natural, as he was unaware that Oumi and Kouji had witnessed him reduce Yoh to tears.

In the first place, did Oumi actually make it to Fuminori's house? She had been riding a wave of emotions when she'd left, and might very well have calmed down and changed her mind halfway there.
Or perhaps she ran into trouble on the way?

Kouji concluded - or, more accurately, convinced himself - that one of these possibilities was the truth, subconsciously denying the one remaining possibility.

In other words, the possibility that Fuminori was lying; that he had met Oumi, and was involved with her disappearance.....

When questioned by the police, Kouji only told the truth about Oumi's destination up to the district and train station, maintaining that he had no idea where she'd planned to go after that.

He wanted to cooperate with the search, of course, but knew that Oumi couldn't have made it to Fuminori's house. Fuminori said so himself, didn't he? In that case, he'd told the police everything they needed to know.
Not wanting to get the still-fragile Fuminori involved, he forced himself to accept this flimsy logic.

But now, the conflict has built up inside Kouji without his notice, and only formless suspicion towards Fuminori cycles through his mind.

Kouji is deep in thought, paying no attention to his surroundings, but perhaps that is what allows him to catch sight of his friend's back through the crowd of milling students.

Fuminori?

At first, Kouji assumes that he's headed to the lecture hall, but it soon appears that he is instead going home.
Strange; there should be required classes for medical students in the afternoon.
Though he is initially surprised, Kouji's hesitation lasts for only a second.
Kouji follows his friend, taking care to stay far enough behind that he won't be noticed.

Fuminori wasn't going home, as became obvious when he boarded a train heading in the opposite direction.
Kouji's next guess was that he was going to see his doctor at the T University Hospital, but Fuminori rode straight through the closest station.

Where's he going.....?

At first, Kouji felt awfully foolish, rebuking himself for tailing his friend like this, but his conscience fell silent as Fuminori's actions became more mysterious.
The stranger it gets, the closer Kouji feels to discovering the truth behind Fuminori's sudden transformation. Any knowledge would be welcome, no matter how slight.

Even Kouji is beginning to think that there must be something more behind Fuminori's change than the accident alone. He wants a more satisfying answer, one that will help him decide whether or not Fuminori can be trusted.

Fuminori gets off at a small station in a nondescript suburban area. Kouji follows, trying not to lose sight of him amidst the other disembarking passengers.

The station has neither a traffic circle nor a shopping street in front of it; the area is quite desolate, possessing only a small bookstore, convenience store, and market. It is easy for Kouji to keep Fuminori in view.

Fuminori seems to know these streets, clearly intent on a single goal as he hurries through the residential neighborhood. Carved out of the hills, the area has many slopes, and here and there remain steep inclines and wooded areas that escaped assimilation. Kouji, who moved to Tokyo to attend school, is amazed that such a quiet place exists less than an hour out of the city.

Before long, Fuminori reaches a house. Without ringing the bell or even knocking on the door, he vanishes inside as though sucked into a vacuum, leaving Kouji to wonder how Fuminori can treat the house as his own.

After waiting to see if Fuminori will come back out, Kouji approaches the gate and checks the nameplate.

Ougai

Kouji has never heard of anyone by that name among Fuminori's acquaintances.
Next, his attention is drawn to the thick wad of leaflets sticking out of the mail slot, which, coupled with the general dilapidated feel of the place, suggests that it has been long since abandonded.

A small playground about two blocks away provides an adequate vantage point from which to watch the front of the Ougai home. Fortunately, it does not appear to be the sort of house that has a rear exit.
Chiding himself for not stocking up on cigarettes, Kouji settles down on a bench to begin his stakeout.

One hour passes, and then another, but there remains no sign of movement around the Ougai residence as twilight settles upon the neighborhood.
After Kouji's one pack of cigarettes runs out, the stakeout becomes a battle against mounting impatience. He kills time by redialing Oumi on his cell and sending her short text messages, but his efforts are as futile as he knew they would be.

When the sky begins to turn deep blue and the streetlights come on, Fuminori finally emerges from the house and heads back towards the station with the same hurried stride.

After some brief consideration, Kouji decides that right now, investigating the house is more important than tailing Fuminori.

He rings the doorbell just to make sure. Receiving the expected silence in response, he checks to make sure no one is watching and turns the doorknob.
The door is not locked.

The moment he enters the house, thick, stale air fills Kouji's nostrils. Redolent of mold and dust, it is the unmistakable smell of a house that has long lain untouched.
There is also a faint hint of something indescribable in the air, something reminiscent of damp sewers and fetid cisterns.

Flipping the light switch does nothing. The power must be dead, or perhaps cut off.

Kouji uses his oil lighter to illuminate the immediate area. In the thick dust covering the floor,

he can clearly see several brand-new trails of footprints that could have only been made by shoes - they must be Fuminori's. Showing an equal lack of reservation, Kouji also enters with his shoes on.

The lighter's flickering flame pushes back the deathly silence and gloom of the house.
Kouji is surprised to see evidence of life remaining; everything from furniture to tableware and appliances is intact. Nothing seems to be missing.

The thickness of the dust suggests that the house has been empty for several months, which means that the owner must have left with little more than the clothes on his back. Could he have gone on a long vacation?

The calendar in the den is still turned to April.
Empty and silent, yet still exhibiting signs of the life that was once lived there, the house reminds Kouji of a passenger ship resting at the bottom of the sea. In the graveyard-like quiet, a sinister thought suddenly runs through his head.

No one is living here, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the owner left. Maybe he was killed, and his rotting corpse is right under my feet——

Kouji finds himself wanting a stronger light. A maglite in his hand would make him feel a lot better.

Following what appear to be Fuminori's footprints, Kouji ascends to the second floor, where he begins to catch the scent of paper in the stale air. It is the smell of old books, instantly familiar to anyone who has worked in an antique bookstore or library.

The second floor turns out to be a study, its towering shelves packed with such a vast number of books that Kouji fears for the stability of the floor. As a medical student himself, he is able to discern at a glance that this study belongs to a medical professional, and a high-level one at that.
Judging by the content of the books, a smorgasboard of technical volumes far beyond a simple student, the owner must be more interested in research than clinical medicine.

It appears that Fuminori spent most of his time here, the scattered dust making it clear that he was searching for something.
He seems to have focused on going through the desk and file cabinet, as the contents of their drawers are in obvious disarray.

A small pile of books on a side table catches his eye. Being next to the desk, they must have been the most frequently read. What sort of books they are could shed some light on the person who worked here——

Kouji frowns as he examines the three books. The old, leather-bound Western tomes are not scientific texts, but rather the kind of books you would expect to see in a glass case at a rare book store.
The titles are equally mysterious.appears to be about semiotics, but Ars Magna et Ultima is some kind of treatise on..... divination? And then there's the Voynich Manuscript, which appears to be a sort of picture book.When he pages through it, however, he finds line after line of utterly incomprehensible characters. Maybe it's some kind of cipher.

Whatever they are, they clearly have nothing to do with medicine, refuting Kouji's earlier guess that Mr. Ougai was a doctor.

Looking down, Kouji suddenly notices the glint of something black and metallic underneath the chair.
A pocket-sized maglite, quite out of place among all these dusty books. Fuminori must have brought it in.

With slight relief, Kouji exchanges his lighter for the maglite. Its tiny body emits a powerful white beam that casts away the darkness.
His courage restored, he decides to explore the rest of the house.

".....Hm?"

Kouji notices something strange, something that was not visible in the lighter's weak flame.

The slime.

Especially thick on the doorknobs and stair banisters, these are no mere handprints. Dark, slimy stains are everywhere, like someone had their hands wrapped in greasy cloth.
Looking closer, he sees what appear to be places where slime was splashed low on the walls and near the floor. It's almost as if a wet mop was run violently across the floor.

"....."

Are these more remnants of Ougai's life? No, these marks are much too strange. Kouji begins to feel sick as he finds himself imagining the denizen of this place wandering around with filthy water dripping from its entire body.

Finding the bedroom next to the study, Kouji checks the closet on a hunch.
He finds two empty suitcases - not what one would leave behind when going on a long vacation.
A sudden chill runs through him. So whoever was living here is still somewhere inside the house——

Supressing the urge to flee, Kouji goes back downstairs to check the first floor.

If he finds a corpse, he'll have to call the police right away. He can get away with trespassing if he reports it first, but if they find the body later, it'll be awfully hard to explain his fingerprints all over the house.

The maglite reveals the den to be covered in even more slime than the rest of the house. The sofa looks as though it was dredged from the bottom of a swamp.

In the kitchen, Kouji takes one look at the sink and decides not to get any closer. He doesn't want any more fuel for his imagination.

He reaches the door to the bathroom.
A common scene from TV dramas flashes through his head: a suicide with slit wrists floating in a bathtub filled with water.
And wasn't there a movie where a hitman butchers his victim's body in a bathroom.....?

Kouji steels himself and opens the door slowly, shining his light into the ceramic bathtub that appears from the darkness like a white ghost.

Dried flesh and blood clinging to curved rib bones has turned the inside of the tub black.

Kouji puts one hand against the wall to steady himself as his legs threaten to buckle. Something is wrong, he realizes as he desperately tries to get his thoughts in order.
Bones - but they're too small, and there are too many of them.

They aren't human.

After taking several deep breaths to calm himself, Kouji enters the bathroom and examines the tub.

The tub is half filled with small bones piled on top of each other like fallen leaves. Too small to be human, they appear to be from small animals like dogs, cats, mice, and sparrows.
Even so, the quantity is mind-boggling. How many corpses would it take to produce this many bones?

The bones have all been separated from each other, and it doesn't appear that the bodies were just thrown into the tub and left to rot.
This is made clear by the many groove-like impressions left in each bone —— marks left by teeth biting through flesh.

Kouji's sanity won't let him consider the possibility that a human could have done this.
The owner of this house must have been keeping some sort of carnivorous animal as a pet, giving it the bones of small animals to eat and disposing of the remains in the bathtub.
But why not dispose of the leftovers properly? They could have just been thrown out with the garbage. Or was there something keeping him from leaving the house?

The momentary relief Kouji felt when he realized that the bones weren't human is once again under attack by the ever-deepening mystery permeating this house.

And just what the hell was Fuminori doing here?

"What are you doing, Kouji?"

Kouji whirls around, his penlight revealing Fuminori's expressionless face.

"You're trespassing, Kouji."
"So..... are you," Kouji replies, barely managing to speak over the pounding of his heart.

Fuminori pushes past Kouji and looks nonchalantly into the bathtub, as though there's nothing strange about a tub filled with bones.

"I know the owner of this house. I was just asked to find something."
"You know them..... since when? Who are they?"

Kouji doesn't want to believe that the old, friendly Fuminori could have had contact with the denizens of this house.

"I'll introduce you one of these days," he says, turning to leave without even looking at Kouji.
"I owe them my life, after all."

"Hey, Fuminori.....!"

With his heart finally beating normally again, Kouji runs after Fuminori.

"Wait, are they the reason you've gotten so strange all of the——"

Standing in the entrance, Fuminori glares coldly at Kouji over his shoulder.
The utter lack of emotion in his eyes gives Kouji pause.

"You followed me, didn't you, Kouji?"
"....."

With no possible excuse, Kouji can only swallow under Fuminori's piercing stare.

"That's a nuisance. I'll ask you not to do it again."

"——Fine."

Fuminori walks away without another word, leaving Kouji alone in the entrance.

Until this moment, there was still a part of Kouji that wanted to consider Sakisaka Fuminori a close friend.
Now, however, there is only ice cold terror.

Does the Fuminori he knew no longer exist? Was the person who just stared Kouji down an impostor wearing Fuminori's skin?
Kouji has begun to believe that it might be so.

What a nuisance.....
Why does he insist on interfering?
If he only spoke with me to exchange pleasantries, even I could bear it. But for him to stick his neck into my business just to satisfy his curiosity..... he is clearly violating my privacy.

Kouji is a perfect example of someone who thinks that it's always good to take an interest in other people's affairs.
He probably thinks that he's showing concern for me by prying into my personal life.
He couldn't be more annoying.

If he keeps interfering, I might have to find some way to deal with him.
Like Saya said, I have to keep my search for Professor Ougai as secret as possible. Kouji could ruin everything.

Saya said that there would be nothing to help with the search, but I unexpectedly found many things of value in the Professor's house. I didn't have time to fully examine the house today; at this rate, it'll probably take several days to go through the study alone.

I'll have to go to and from the house a lot, but now Kouji knows where it is. Will he keep making things difficult.....?

"——Excuse me, Sakisaka-kun," a hair-raising voice calls as I'm about to enter my gate.
Supressing a shudder, I put on a fake smile and turn to face the writhing mass of rotting flesh that is staring at me with bulging eyes.

"Good evening, Sakisaka-san. Are you just getting home?"

"Yes, I am....."

Ah, yes; this is my next door neighbor Suzumi, a middle-aged painter - I think - who spends all day at home while his wife works.
I haven't had much interaction with him, so why is he suddenly talking to me today?

"Have you gotten used to living alone?"
"Yes..... Thank you for your help."
".....I know it must be very difficult, but you're still young. You have to work hard to move on with your life."
"Yes....."

——What is this? Did he stop me just to deliver a lecture?

"With such a big house, it must be hard to take care of everything by yourself."

"Yes, I suppose I am having trouble.""Why not at least hire a caretaker? Didn't your father have one?"
"Yes, but I'm still a student, and my funds are limited. Such an expense would be....."
"I see——"

The flesh-beast undulates foully, as though it still has something to say. Just looking at it is driving me close to the edge.

"Even so, don't you think you should at least tend to your yard? I'd be happy to help.""No, thank you. I'll manage on my own."

.....Now I get it. He's worried that the unsightliness of my house might ruin the beauty of his own. Damned snob.

Flashing a token smile, I retreat into the safety of my gate.
I can feel Suzumi's eyes boring into my back all the way to the front door. Why won't everyone stay out of my life!? I want to find a place free of other people - a place where I can live together with Saya.

Suzumi Yousuke sighs in annoyance as he watches the neighbor boy retreat into his house.

What's with his attitude? Even while talking, he kept his eyes averted, as though he was looking at something filthy.
Has the eldest son of the Sakisaka family always been such an unpleasant young man? No, of course not. When his parents were still alive, he had been a normal youth - slightly introverted, yet sensitive.
The unfamiliarity of living alone must be placing stress upon him. If this continues, he might develop mental problems.
.....Or is it too late already?</I> Yousuke wonders as he wearily gazes over the Sakisaka yard.

Even during dinner, Yousuke can't shake the neighboring house from his mind.

"——What's wrong, honey? You look like something's bothering you."
"Yeah..... I saw the young man from next door today."
"Next door - you mean Fuminori-oniichan?"
"Yeah. I spoke to him about that yard."
"I know..... I wish he'd at least do something about that smell."

The stink coming from the Sakisaka house grows worse each day, and the Suzumi family is at its wits' end.

"Could there be a dead cat or something in those bushes? Surely he must notice the smell coming from his own yard."
"He couldn't be leaving raw garbage out there, could he?"
"No, surely not....."
"No, I wouldn't put it past him now. Who knows what he's doing in there all day with the storm shutters closed. What kind of life is he leading.....?"

"Did oniichan go crazy?"
"Now, Hiromi, you mustn't say things like that."
"Honestly, with the way things are going, I'm starting to wonder if he's developed paranoia or something."
".....Will he be alright?"
"Unless he admits it and gets himself to a doctor soon, who knows....."

The seconds crawl by, each tick of the clock compounding my agony. When I returned from the Ougai house, I was greeted by a silent, empty home. Saya had vanished without leaving any clue as to her whereabouts.

It isn't rare for her to go for walks at night; I've often gone with her. However, such outings always take place in the middle of the night, when no one is around, and never last for more

than two hours.

Right now, it's five in the morning. Soon the sky will begin to show the first light of dawn.
Even if she left right before I returned, she's still been gone for almost half a day.

Unable to sleep, I can only wait in anguish. I tried to distract myself by painting more of the other rooms, but I couldn't concentrate on the work.
If I had known this would happen, I would have left the Ougai house sooner. I wish I hadn't wasted time on Kouji.

If Saya doesn't return —— the thought fills me with such panic that I want to tear my hair out. After its long absence, the terror of true loneliness is slowly crushing me.

.....At last, the cowbell chimes and Saya's long-awaited "I'm home!" rings out from the bottom of the stairs. As I jump out of my bed in relief, all of the mental stress that has built up through the night is released in a wave that threatens to sweep me off my feet.

"Ahh, so tired....." Saya says as she climbs the stairs. "I knew going all the way there and back would be hard."Saya! Where have you——"

My question trails off as I notice the thick bundles of paper that she's carrying under her arms.

"——What are those?"
"Your medical charts and surgery records. I went back to the hospital today."

Saya all but drops her bundles on the floor, sending paper flying everywhere.
Pulling her favorite cushion over, she collapses into it and stretches luxuriously.

"Y-you walked all the way back from T University in the middle of the night?"
"Sorry," she says, skillfully gathering the scattered papers together one by one. "I meant to come back sooner, but there were so many files to go through."

"So I decided to just bring everything. It was so heavy."

Maybe I'm just tired, but I'm not understanding a word Saya's saying.

"Wait..... What are you planning to do with all of this?"
"What do you mean? I'm going to study them, of course," she replies, holding one MRI photograph after another up to the light. "I'll have plenty of time to go over them here."

At first, I think she's just playing around, but the occasional mutters of "Ah, better check this one," "Oh, I see," and the like as she separates photos into the growing pile next to her makes me think this might not be a joke after all.

"Can you understand this stuff?"
"I learned a lot from Dad. Hmm..... I see, so that's how it is. .....No wonder it can't be fixed."
".....It can't be fixed?"
"By a human doctor, that is."

I can't tell if she's being serious or not.

"Even for me, it'll probably be a little tough," she says offhandedly, even as her hands

continue to shuffle papers. "I'll have to try some things first."

Watching more carefully, I realize that her eyes are scanning each page rapidly - so fast, in fact, that I was unable to notice it at first.
——Is it possible that Saya, a young girl, is trying to read - no, is actually reading my charts?

"Yeah?" she answers coolly, looking up from the charts.

"I'm tired..... Let's go to bed."
"Sure," Saya replies with a grin, "if that's what you want."

Tossing aside the papers she was sorting, she immediately starts to remove my clothes.

"H-hey....."
"Come on, just once before bed. Okay?"

Contrary to her appearance, Saya's appetite for sex would put any adult to shame -- you could even say it's a little unnatural.
She's not just passionate; she also has unlimited stamina, making me wonder where her slender body gets all the energy from. Never satisfied with letting me feast on her to my heart's content, she always uses me to pleasure herself until I'm forced to tap out.

"Hey, Saya..... Don't you think it's unhealthy to be doing this every day?""Eh? Are you sick, Fuminori?"
"No, not me..... My body is all grown up, so I'm fine. But you're still——""Ahaha, don't worry!"

She laughs playfully as she pushes me onto the bed, the familiar sweet sensation of her weight and skin rendering me helpless.

"I am worried! We haven't even used any contraception."

For some unfathomable reason, Saya is completely uninterested in such precautions. She doesn't just not use protection; she even insists that I ejaculate inside of her. Surely she must know the risks -- which can only mean that she wants to get pregnant.

"Fuminori....." she begins, staring straight into my eyes. "You don't want me to have your children?"
"....."
How can I respond to that?
".....It's not that. Your body is too small. Pregnancy is a serious burden, you know?"

"Hmm, I don't think you have to worry about that....."

Saya seems unsure how to reply, but not because she doesn't understand what I just said. Rather, the bemused look on her face makes it seem as though I'm the one not getting it.
"——But I know that you're just thinking of me," she says suddenly, her smile glowing with innocence. "So I'm still happy!"
"....."

By the time I break the spell of her angelic smile, Saya has undone my belt and is removing my pants.

"C-come on, Saya——"

"Relax," she says teasingly as she bares my crotch and wraps her slender white fingers

around my penis and testicles. "Tonight, I'll do it so you don't have to worry."

The feeling of her willowy, unblemished fingers embracing me is enough to fill me with twisted ecstasy and draw out my male instinct.

"Uh....."

Seeing my response, Saya brings her face to my groin and lovingly wraps her lips around the head of my penis.

"....!"

My hips jerk involuntarily at the unexpected, intense shock of her sucking hard on such a sensitive area.

"——Did that hurt?" she asks, looking timidly up at me as she soothingly strokes my shaft.

"No..... I'm fine....."

Just where did Saya learn how to pleasure a man so well?
I can't believe the precision and skill of her ministrations. Her sinuous fingers are like snakes coiled around my manhood, their sensual undulations drawing desire forth from my loins.

As if all ten of her fingers weren't enough to drown me in pleasure, next she adds her lips and tongue.

"*Lick*.....*slurp*....."

The mind-blowing pleasure from this new stimulation instantly threatens to push me over the edge.

A damp heat different from that of her womb presses down on me from all directions.

Looking down, I see my lust filling her tiny mouth, stretching the graceful lines of her cheeks and jaw so far that I fear she might break.
The sight makes me worry that she's pushing herself too far, but her tongue continues to mercilessly devour me like a kitten desperately sucking on her mother's teat.

As I watch, I begin to feel like I'm violating Saya's innocent, unsullied face. The feeling of breaking a taboo further increases my perverted ecstasy.
In every man lurks the dark desire to spoil that which is beautiful. Saya's bewitching body, able to drive me mad every night, is perfectly designed to draw out such savage lusts.

"Hey, Saya——"

I can't hold it anymore. I'll come any second now.
But where?
When the moment comes, what will I do with this thing in Saya's mouth?

"H-hey, wait, I'm going to——"

I try to pull out, but Saya doesn't let me.
She grabs my thighs and doubles the intensity of her sucking, as if she's trying to pull me even deeper into her throat.

Even though I'm worried about her, my body is already at its limit.

As irresistable waves of pleasure sweep away my willpower, I unleash my pent-up seed ——deep into Saya's throat.

What have I done.....? I feel like I'm about to panic.
Regardless of the situation, I shouldn't have ejaculated into her mouth.
Even if Saya doesn't mind, what if she chokes on it? If she suffocates.....

Saya, however, pays no attention to my distress. Still clinging to my waist like a predator unwilling to relinquish its prey, she starts swallowing effortlessly like someone dying of hunger.

"——*Gulp*——*Gulp*——"

What is she swallowing?
——The answer is obvious, of course: every last drop of the passion that I just disgorged.

"....."

This is the first time I've ever had a girl do this to me; to be honest, I'm speechless with shock.
I've always been prejudiced against fellatio, thinking it to be something that perverted, sadistic men force women to do. But Saya——

"Mm——pwah..... Hehe, that was good, Fuminori."

She looks up at me, answering my confusion by smiling like she just pulled the greatest prank of her life. Her small tongue darts out from her lips to lick away the last milky remnants around her mouth.
That tongue was just licking my..... The thought sends a worrying jolt of pleasure to my brain.

"See? You don't have to worry if I do it like this."

"Ah..... Well——"

That's hardly the problem, but I have no idea how to respond.

"Hey..... Was it bad? Didn't it feel good?"

Hearing the sudden nervousness in Saya's voice, I hastily stammer,"O-of course it——felt good."
In fact, it felt so good that I thought I'd go crazy - but I can't say that.....

".....But Saya, you don't have to swallow it....."
"Eh〜? But..... I want it!"

Suddenly distraught, Saya clings to me like a child who's just had her candy stolen from her.

"I want every last drop of it. I want it inside of me."

"Inside.....?"

So Saya really does want to bear my child?
I'm —— not adverse to the idea. I still think it might be too early, of course, but there isn't much point in worrying about my reputation now; assuming that Saya and I will be left alone, I even welcome it.

However, that only explains her appetite for normal sex. I still don't know why she wants to swallow during fellatio.
——Well, I suppose that what's "impure" or "taboo" differs from person to person, and I can't simply apply normal values to Saya.

".....You don't like it?"
"....."

She gazes up at me pleadingly. How can I resist?

"I do——like it. As long as you're okay with it, so am I."

Saya smiles with relief and burrows contentedly into my chest.

"I love you, Fuminori," she purrs softly.

With her body draped over mine, I become even more aware of how light and delicate she is.
Can this tiny girl and I really live as husband and wife?

After the question runs through my head, I feel a pang of self-loathing. How can I still be afraid after all that's happened?

Saya's feelings are so earnest. How can I not accept them?
I need to resolve once and for all to rid myself of the useless trappings of morality.
Saya and I are all that matters. There's no point in worrying about what others think anymore - although, I suppose I'll still need to talk to Saya's guardian, of course..... I seriously need to find Professor Ougai as soon as possible.....

By the time I drift to sleep in exhaustion's comforting embrace, all doubts about Saya's actions have vanished from my mind.
——Whatever the case, all that matters is that she's returned to me.

2 P.M. - for Suzumi Yousuke, this is the most fulfilling time of day.

After seeing his wife and daughter off, taking care of the morning chores, and eating a leisurely lunch, it's finally time to sit down at his easel.
He's not a particularly popular painter, and he would only hold an exhibition if he were hurting for money. However, the editorial design work he does on the side ensures that there's always enough to support his daily lifestyle.
Alongside the salary his wife earns working for a magazine, they're able to pay their mortgage, send their daughter to school, and still have plenty left over.

Yousuke's life is perfect - leisurely and absent of want.
He loves his house, considering it the symbol of his life. When he mows the lawn, polishes the windows and floors, and cleans the kitchen, toilet, and bath, he feels the same joy as he does when washing his own body.
Just as he knows the length of his fingernails and the time since his last meal, he also knows everything about his house's condition: the status of every door, the freshness of every flower, the amount of ice in the ice tray - every last detail. This is his pride, and when he sits in his studio, smelling the turpentine and knowing that each element of his house is in perfect order, he is filled with the ultimate satisfaction.

While trying to find the right combination of paints on his palette, he suddenly feels thirsty, but soon remembers that there isn't much orange juice left in the refrigerator.
In fact, it's also about time to stock up on bath additive and powdered soap. He could get everything at the supermarket when he goes to shop for dinner, but it'll probably be pretty heavy.

Now then, where should I leave off to go shopping..... he wonders idly as he heads downstairs to the kitchen.

Just then, a waft of air tickles the back of his neck, bringing him to a halt in the middle of the hallway.

A breeze coming from somewhere ——— impossible. Every window in the house is closed. Yousuke shut them himself during his morning cleaning.

Yousuke enters the living room, searching for the source of the wind.

Something stinks; it's the same pungent smell of fetid swampland that emanates from the Sakisaka house. Could the wind be carrying it from the yard next door?
The window facing the Sakisaka yard is open, its curtains billowing loosely in the gentle breeze.

There's a hole in the glass next to the lock. It looks strange, like it was melted by some chemical instead of broken. Someone must have reached through the hole to unlock the window.

Yousuke stands paralyzed, his heart pounding with anger - and even moreso with fear.
He listens carefully, but hears nothing. Perhaps the intruder has already finished his business and left -- but a burglar wouldn't have left the room untouched, would he?
Maybe he heard Yousuke coming and hid somewhere———

Yousuke realizes that his still-wet palette knife is in his right hand. He must have forgotten to put it aside before going downstairs.
He stares numbly at the knife for a moment, then decides that it's not enough protection.

Instead, he grabs the ashtray sitting on top of the table. Made of thick, solid glass, it is big and heavy enough to serve as a blunt weapon.
The home that he has cleaned every inch of, that he thought of as part of himself, now seems like an entirely different world.

Keenly aware of the thumping of his heart, Yousuke looks around the living room and sees little that could be used as a hiding place. The intruder must have gone either to the guest room or through the dining room to the kitchen.
The kitchen is close to the stairs. If there had been movement, Yousuke would have noticed it when he came down -- which means that the guest room is the most likely place.
He shuffles over to the guest room door and prepares to slide it open.

But ——— what is that stench? Could the breeze alone be carrying such a potent fetor? It's as if the odor is coming from inside the room.

He steels himself and throws open the door.

The straw-matted, Japanese-style room is empty. There is a closet, but no one could fit in there.
So the intruder already left..... Yousuke relaxes, the exhaustion of sudden relief coming over him.

And that's when something seizes his ankle.

The instant he freezes in shock, his leg is yanked out from under him, sending him crashing to the floor. Stars explode behind his eyes as his head smacks against the door rail.

The hand - if it can even be called that - wrapped around Yousuke's ankle extends all the way back to underneath the living room sofa.
There are barely five centimeters between the sofa and the floor, but the intruder is able to hide in that tiny space.
It can't possibly be human.

"Uwahhhhhhhh!?"

Before the screaming Yousuke can regain his footing, countless hand-like things seize his arms and legs, rendering him helpless.

"Calm down. Don't be scared."

The muffled, gurgling, voice-like sound is accompanied by the sensation of something cold and soft crawling on top of him.

"Hiii, hiiii, hiiiiiii!"

With his throat already seizing up, the panicked Yousuke can't even scream properly.

"It won't hurt," the hideous voice whispers in his ear. "Don't be scared. It won't hurt."

Thin, tubelike appendages penetrate his ears and nose, wriggling deeper into his skull.

Right before the horrifying sensation drives him mad, Yousuke loses consciousness.

"Thank you for taking the time to see us," Kouji says, his humble bow concealing his surprise at the doctor's youth.

Even without her light makeup, she wouldn't look a day over thirty. She must be quite talented to be a leading neurosurgeon at such a young age.

"Don't mention it. I was hoping somebody like you two would come along."

Her friendly smile belies the coldness one might expect from her overly refined beauty.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Dr. Tanbo, Sakisaka Fuminori-kun's attending physician.""I'm Fuminori's friend Tonoh Kouji. This is Tsukuba Yoh."

Yoh gives a quick bow, her expression apologetic.

When they had arrived at T University Medical Center and asked to see Fuminori's doctor, Kouji and Yoh had been prepared for rejection. They hadn't expected the ease with which they were able to see the doctor.

"You say you want to know what's wrong with Sakisaka-kun - well, so do I."
"I see....."
"He didn't come in for his checkup two days ago. I tried calling his home, but there was no answer."

Two days ago..... the day Fuminori had been searching that mysterious abandoned house. Kouji frowns, wondering what had been important enough for him to blow off his appointment.

"What is he like at school?"

"He's..... totally screwed up."

Seeing Yoh's shoulders jerk out of the corner of his eye, Kouji regrets not choosing his words more carefully.

"Since the accident, he's been like a completely different person. We have no idea what to do now..... so we thought that talking to you might help."

".....Are you medical students too?"
"Eh? Yes....."

"Do you want to see his chart?"

".....You'd really show it to us?"

After gazing briefly at the incredulous Kouji, Dr. Tanbo sighs and says, "It appears that someone wanted to see it; and without the hospital's permission, too."

"Two nights ago, someone broke into the hospital and stole Sakisaka-kun's charts from the archives."
"——Seriously?"

She stares hard at the astonished students, then shakes her head with a tired smirk.
"Well, it doesn't look like you two are involved. I'm relieved."
"O-of course we aren't."
"However, the culprit must have had an interest in Sakisaka-kun's condition - or they wanted to erase his records.Either way, I can only assume that it was someone close to him."
An ominous thought flashes through Kouji's mind: It couldn't have been Fuminori himself, could it?

Kouji looks at Dr. Tanbo and finds her staring right back at him, her expression grave. He realizes that she must be harboring the same suspicion.

"What do you think? Do you have any idea who among his associates might have done it?"
Perhaps Tanbo didn't have anyone in mind when she asked, but Kouji's thoughts immediately fly to the eerie house that Fuminori led him to.

"I don't know if they're acquainted or not, but —— there's someone called Ougai, probably a doctor or a....."

Kouji stops speaking as he sees the dramatic change that has come across Tanbo's face.
".....You know him?"
"Do you know when and where Sakisaka-kun first encountered that man?"
"No, that's what I'd like to know. Doctor, just who is this Ougai?"

After remaining in pained silence for some time, Tanbo lets loose a heavy sigh.

"——Alright. It's not like you couldn't find out on your own easily enough. Ougai Masahiko was

a professor at this university He was dismissed over six months ago, however, following several scandals."
"Scandals? What did he do?"
"I can't say any more to outsiders. And, anyway, it has nothing to do with Sakisaka-kun."

Kouji has no argument with which to answer Tanbo's flat rejection. However, he can't shake the feeling that this Ougai person is the key to unraveling the mystery surrounding Fuminori.

"Doctor," he says, making up his mind. "Sakisaka Fuminori might be —— involved in a crime."

At this sudden declaration, both Tanbo and Yoh raise their eyebrows.

"What do you mean?"
"Someone went missing after going to see him. Fuminori denies any involvement, of course."

"You mean..... Oumi-chan?"

Kouji is unable to bear the shock in Yoh's voice.

"Sorry, Tsukuba..... I couldn't tell you."

Tanbo is frowning, her expression even more serious than before.

"Right now, this Ougai seems to be the center of Fuminori's attention. If we know who he is and what Fuminori's looking for, we might start to see the whole picture.
Please tell us, Doctor. Just what happened at this hospital?"

"....."

Dr. Tanbo hesitates for some time, refusing to make eye contact, but she finally shakes her head.

".....I'm sorry. This is..... not something I can decide on my own."
"Doctor——"

"Give me some time. I'll do my own investigating now that I know that this can't be ignored."
"——Please."

Kouji is out of options. All that's left is to trust this young doctor. It's frustrating, but there's a limit to what can be done for a friend.

"Let's exchange cell phone numbers. I'll call you if I learn anything, and you call me the moment anything changes."
"Yes, alright."

What the..... What happened to me?
Yousuke's consciousness returns slowly, as though rising from a bog.
He's cold -- no, he's hot.
Something itches, like tepid tongues and cold slugs crawling over his skin.
What the hell's going on? he wonders as he timidly opens his eyes.

"Ah——"

It's all over the walls and ceiling.
The <I>thing</I> that attacked him in the living room - that entered his skull - it's everywhere——
Terror shatters Yousuke's sanity.

"Uwa-ah-ahhhhhh!"

He throws off the thing lying on top of him, but his wild flailing sends him crashing to the floor.

——But is it really the floor? The long, wriggling fibers of what should be the carpet are winding themselves around his fingers.
The floor is made of worms.

"Hiii!"

He tears his limbs free of the worms and tries to stand, but loses his balance and goes crashing to the floor again. The worms immediately swarm over his entire body.

Where the hell am I.....
Where did that thing take me!?
Yousuke crawls across the worm-ridden floor towards the only exit from the pulsating room.

When he gets outside, however, he finds that the hallways and other rooms are all made of blood, bile, and rotten meat. There is no place to run.

"What..... What is this!?"

Most terrifying of all..... this hellish place has the same layout as Yousuke's house. In a half-mad daze, he wanders through the warped, nightmarish version of his home.

In the small room where his studio should be, he finds an easel made of bones displaying a blood-soaked canvas. Like some cruel joke, everything is exactly where it would be in Yousuke's studio.

"Dammit..... Let me out..... Let me out of here!!"

Howling, Yousuke swings his arms wildly, pummeling everything within reach.
The easel of bone shatters, driving splinters into his fist.
He feels the sharp pain —— but does not awaken from the nightmare. If this isn't a dream, then what is it?

When his strength gives out, Yousuke falls to his knees, sobbing. For the first time in his life, he prays to the gods.

The sound of the door opening and closing grates on his ears.
Downstairs..... the front door? Someone else is here?

"I'm home."

Yousuke trembles at the bloodcurdling sound -- it's that thing again. The monster has returned.

"Daddy, I'm home! Where's dinner～?"
"Oh, he's not here? Did he go shopping?"

"When can we eat〜?"

Yousuke hears the sound of something slimy sloshing its way up the stairs. Even as he cowers in terror, he slides his trembling hand across the floor and grabs one of the bones from the broken easel.
The tip of the bone is nice and sharp. If he holds it in both hands and puts his weight behind it, he might be able to use it to protect himself.

"Honey, are you home?"

The monster's growls are getting closer. Holding his breath, Yousuke presses his back against the wall next to the door.
The pounding of his heart is like thunder in his ears, so loud that he fears the creature might hear it. He knows that he might be eaten if it finds him again, but it's all he can do just to keep from crying.

At last, the door to his room swings slowly open.....
"——Honey?"

"Uwaaaaaa!"

Yousuke leaps on the creature as it enters, fear turning his roar into a high-pitched scream. The flesh-beast is covered in sludge and vile juices, but, before horror can paralyze him, Yousuke brings his bone-stake stabbing down.

"Gyaaaaaaa!" the monster screams as the stake pierces its chest and punches through to the other side. The stinking creature falls back, writhing in agony.
The sight of its pain sets Yousuke's blood on fire.
<I>I can win. I can kill it! If I can finish it off before it enters my head again, I'll be saved!

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

Grabbing the bone with both hands, Yousuke twists again and again, gouging an ever-widening hole out of the monster's flesh.
The monster convulses and gurgles, its trembling tentacles reaching up as though begging for help.

"Die! Die! Dieeeeee!"

Yousuke knocks it to the floor, then brings his heel crashing down on its flopping body again and again - with each stomp, its groans and spasms grow weaker.

When the monster at last stops twitching, Yousuke, panting hard, tears the stake from its corpse and rises to his feet.

".....Daddy?" something squeals.

Yousuke turns around to see another, smaller monster peeking out at him from the stair landing.
So there's still one left——

His previous desperate, rage-filled attack both exhilarated him and gave him a taste for violence. This one will be easier; it's smaller and weaker, after all.
Grinning crazily, Yousuke raises his stake and sidles towards the second creature.

The small monster flees screaming down the stairs.

Not about to let his prey escape, Yousuke roars and gives chase. The thought that maybe the nightmare will end if he kills every monster feeds his savage bloodlust.

"Daddy, stop! Daddy!"

When the monster trips and falls in the dining room, Yousuke leaps on top of it and brings the stake down with all his might. He stabs it again and again, mercilessly shredding and pulverizing its flesh, his bloodlust unsatisfied until there is nothing left of its original shape.

Eventually, the only sound in the house is Yousuke's heavy breathing.

He has killed two monsters..... but the nightmare shows no sign of ending.
Yousuke staggers to the front door and goes outside.

".....Aha-ha-ahahahaha....."

The sky, the city - everything - has gone mad.
Twisted shapes, maddening colors, stinking air.
There is no escape - no end to the nightmare.
The last remnant of Yousuke's sanity vanishes like dust in the wind.

"Hi, mister."

Yousuke turns towards the sound of a young girl's voice.

She is standing in front of the house next door, wearing a spotless one piece over her pure white skin. In the midst of this filth-ridden world, she seems to be glowing with beauty.

"How do I look to you, mister?"
"You're..... very cute....."

Yousuke feels a sudden black lust rising within him.

"Really? Then the experiment might be a success!"

Yousuke walks up to the strangely jubilant girl and brushes his hand against her long, smooth hair.

"Such a lovely girl..... You must be the only one in the whole world....."

"......Mister?"

She looks curiously up at the man towering over her, perhaps sensing something disturbing in his hungry stare.

"How about we play a game, little girl?"
"Okay, but..... what are we going to do?"

Yousuke says simply, "Everything that will please me, of course."

Grinning broadly, he grabs the girl's collar and tears the front of her one piece wide open.
Shock and fear twist the girl's lovely, delicate features, stimulating Yousuke's sadism. Even after killing those two monsters, the embers of violence are still smoldering in his heart; and now they have new fuel to burn.

"I like your expression, girl..... Won't you show me an even prettier one?"

"No..... No!"

Tears in her eyes, the terrified girl flees into the Sakisaka house. Yousuke runs after her, feeling the joy of the hunt.

"No! Stay away!"

Even in desperation, she has no hope of outrunning an adult. Yousuke charges down the hallway and easily catches up to her in the kitchen. He grabs her from behind and wrestles her to the floor before she can resist.

"L-let me go! Why are you..... Why are you doing this!?"
"Like I said, because you're just too cute!"

Enjoying the sensation of her thin arms struggling futilely against his grip, Yousuke uses his weight to hold her down while ripping off her remaining scraps of clothing.
"No, I don't want this! Stop!"

Yousuke stares at the smooth body of the girl flopping like a young sweetfish beneath him, entranced by her tiny, hard, cherry-like nipples, soft yet tight belly, and narrow waist. The thought of violating such an immaculate body in the middle of this warped, insane world is irresistably perverted.

Yousuke runs his tongue over every inch of her stomach and chest, as though preparing to eat her whole. She stiffens and whimpers at the sensation.

"It isn't..... supposed to be this way....."
Her tear-choked voice satisfies Yousuke's lust for conquest. This nightmare has violated him,

but now he is able to visit the same torment on this innocent girl. Where he was the victim, he is now the victimizer - the release he feels is intoxicating.

His manhood is ready and waiting, so he frees it from his pants. As he playfully prods the girl's tightly shut slit with it, she finally starts crying in earnest.

"No, stop..... I'm scared! Fuminoriiiii!"
"Ahaha, I haven't even done anything yet."

Putting his mouth close to the sobbing girl's ear, Yousuke softly whispers,"If you're this scared already..... how will you scream when I put it in you?"Sto——"

Staring into her wide-open eyes, Yousuke drives himself deep into her body.

"Hii! Ah-hhhh!"
The girl screams at the pain of having her unlubricated slit forced open. Yousuke is surprised by her lack of a hymen, but even more so by the sensation of her inner folds - much too welcoming for such an immature-seeming girl.

"Oh my, you're awfully used to men. You look cute, but you're really a dirty little girl."
".....No more..... Don't hurt me....."
"No," Yousuke smiles, "I think I have to punish you for being such a bad girl."

Yousuke begins to move inside her, each violent thrust forcing a cry from her lips and tears from her eyes as her head jerks in agony.
Soon she loses the strength to resist and goes limp, concentrating instead on enduring Yousuke's cruelty. Yet she still stares tearfully, pleadingly into Yousuke's lust-inflamed eyes as he pounds mercilessly into her flesh.

"Why..... Why aren't you..... gentle.....?"
"Because you're cute!" Yousuke roars, his breathing wild with passion. "You're too pretty not to hurt; too beautiful not to break!"

The girl's pained, choking gasps - the despair in her eyes - only intensify his ecstasy.

"Help..... Help me..... Fuminori....."

As always, the sights of the city grate on my nerves. Today, however, I don't feel as much hatred as I usually do.
I am growing more and more accustomed to my condition, but my good mood today is mostly thanks to my search of the Ougai house having finally borne fruit.

When I pulled all the drawers out of the desk, I found an envelope stuck in the space between it and the wall. It must have fallen off the back of the writing tray.

Inside were three outdoor photographs. I couldn't recognize the scenery due to my condition, but I'm pretty sure that they show the outside of some building.
Scrawled on the back of each photo was an address: Nagano Prefecture, M Village; Tochigi Prefecture, S Town; Shizuoka Prefecture, H Town. I've never heard of any of them, so they must be way out in the countryside.
The photos were all dated more than ten years ago. I don't know why they were taken or what they mean, but maybe Saya will be able to make some sense of them.

In any case, this is something that even Saya missed when she was living in that house. I wonder how she'll react when I show her what I've found.

Saya——I want to see her. Just the thought of her waiting for my return makes me impatient to get home.

When I step through the gate, I see that the front door is wide open again. This is the second time this has happened.
Upon entering the house this time, however, the sound of Saya crying in the kitchen chills my blood.
And it's not just her. I also hear a low, wet grunting——
There's no time to take off my shoes. I race down the hallway, propelled by a terrifying premonition.

A monster is in my house, and it's raping Saya.
The filth oozing from its body spreads across her skin as it drives its body with animal ferocity between her weakly trembling thighs.
The monster forces its grotesque penis deeper and deeper into her, each brutal thrust warping her vagina in clearly painful ways.

Each time the beast moves, Saya's sobs become cries of agony. She looks at me with tear-filled eyes and calls my name in a weak, breathless voice.

"......Fuminori..... help....."

Rage erupts inside me like black lava, its enormous power making me lightheaded.

The monster finally stops mindlessly gorging itself on Saya's body and turns its head to look at me. Surprised by my own composure, I easily slip past it and grab the meat cleaver sitting next to the sink.

Without a moment's hesitation, I slash at what appears to be its face.
It screams and staggers away from Saya. My attack must have blinded it, because it flails its tentacles wildly as it tries to drive me away.
My bloodlust still unsated, I calmly seize one of its tentacles and plunge my weapon twice more into its quivering flesh.
The blade slices through its body with fascinating ease, each strike sending its blood spraying into my face.

As I carve the monster to pieces and hear its hideous screams, my mind is finally consumed by the flames of rage.
This thing——hurt——my Saya——
No mercy. Its death alone won't satisfy me!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

I give myself to the fury, howling at the top of my lungs as I slash and slash and slash and slash and slash - even after the flesh-beast stops moving, I keep slashing until I realize that its corpse can no longer feel pain. Cursing myself for killing it so quickly, I angrily stab the cleaver into the floor, snapping it in half.
When my thoughts finally begin to regain some order, I find myself still digging the broken knife into the kitchen floor.
The monster is gone; all that's left are pieces of it scattered everywhere.
I stop cutting into the tile, and in the sudden silence I can hear Saya's faint sobs coming from a corner of the kitchen.

"Saya——"

Unable to find the right words, I pull the cowering Saya into my arms. She stiffens in fear at

first, but as soon as she realizes that it's me, she clings to my body and cries.

"Fuminori..... Fuminori..... I was scared..... so scared!"

Not knowing what to say, I can only keep holding her.

This should never have happened to Saya. Everything is to blame - yes, including myself. I couldn't protect her; if I'd been with her, then maybe I could've stopped this.....

".....I'm sorry..... I'm sorry....." she says over and over again, her voice choked with tears.
Not wanting to hear that from her, I pull her head into my chest.

"Don't say that, Saya! It's not your fault!"
I try to reassure her, but she shakes her head vigorously in denial.
"No, it is. I did it....."

I don't understand. What is she saying?

"You did..... what?"
"I messed with his brain," she answers, glancing at the dismembered monster with her swollen eyes.

"I made the inside of his head the same as yours..... I made him see the world like you do."

It takes me some time to understand the meaning of Saya's words, and even longer to decide how to respond.

"What——but——how?"

Finally regaining her composure, Saya responds to my confusion in a low voice.

".....I can do stuff like that. I can change the bodies of other living things..... I've had this ability since I was born."
"....."

"Every organism is different, so I have to study them in detail before I know how to change them.....By doing some research, I figured out what happened to your brain. So I wanted to see if I could do the same thing to someone else."

"But..... why?"
"I thought that, if everyone were like you, they would all——be kind to me."

My heart aches at the loneliness in her voice as she confesses her sorrowful wish.

"But that man..... he wasn't kind at all. He said he wanted to hurt me, break me, and he....."

She starts crying into my chest again, unable to say any more. I gently rub her back while trying to get my jumbled thoughts together.

Saya——what is she? This question is beyond me.

However, there is one thing that I can answer, here and now.

Saya is mistaken..... She is misunderstanding something vital.

"You think that I'm kind to you..... because of the accident?"

"......Yeah," she nods sadly.

I smile and shake my head.

"You're wrong. That was only the beginning."

"......?"

"It's not that simple. The time you and I spent together after we met -- those days, those experiences, are what made us what we are. Understand?"

"Fuminori....."

"I've been together with you all this time..... And because of that..... You became important to me, and I became kind to you. See? It's harder than you think."

Saya is still crying, but now her tears feel warm against my chest.

"Yeah, I understand - I finally understand now."

Her smile shines through her tears.

"I only have you, Fuminori. There will never be anyone else like you."

Now more than ever before, I feel the depth of the bond between us. And I'm sure that Saya feels the same way.

I wrap my arms tightly around Saya and seal her lips with mine. Saya responds, winding her arms around my neck as our tongues desperately seek each other's warmth.

At this moment, Saya is my whole world.

At this moment, I am hers.

The world exists for us alone.

Of course; I still haven't told her something very important.

I don't know why I've never said it before - perhaps because it was always so obvious. However, I should put it into words at least once - this oath of mine.

"Saya, I——"

"——Wait."

She stops me with a finger against my lips.

"Before that, Fuminori, tell me one thing. What do you desire?"

"What do I..... desire?"

Saya nods, staring into my eyes with unusual solemnity.

"Like I said before, I can affect the bodies of living things in a way that nothing else can. And now that I've learned how to manipulate human brains properly——"

Saya pauses and takes a deep breath before continuing.

"I can turn your brain back to normal."

"......What?"

Until now, such a thing hasn't even been in the realm of possibility.

"I just have to do to you the opposite of what I did to that man. It's——really simple."

I replay Saya's words in my head to be sure of their meaning.

"So tell me, Fuminori. Do you want to return to your old life? Do you want to take back what you lost in the accident?"

Branch
I——

Want it all back

Don't need it anymore

Want it all back: "Well, of course," I answer without thinking. "If it's possible to go back, then I want to - I think."

I've never wondered if there could be any other answer.

I stopped dwelling on this question a long time ago. If I'd been asked several months ago, I wouldn't have hesitated.

But what about now? What does it mean to wish for the past, and what could it do to me and Saya? As soon as these thoughts occur to me, my true feelings become unclear.

The hurried answer I just gave her was less certain than I'd thought.

"Oh..... Yeah, of course you would."

Saya smiles softly, her expression an unreadable mixture of what seem to be sorrow and relief. Seeing it fills me with sudden unease, as though I've just wounded her deeply with my careless words.

"Hey, Saya, I....."

"It's okay, Fuminori. Don't say anymore."
Saya kisses me again, as though to silence me, and thrusts her tongue into my mouth with even greater passion than before. As the sweet softness of her tongue clouds my mind, I begin to feel an urgent need to say what she prevented me from saying - to speak those most important words.

"Saya——"
I can't speak, for some reason, and my mind is hazy. My consciouness is slipping away as the euphoria from her kiss spreads to my entire body.
"Sleep well, Fuminori," I hear Saya whisper softly from far away.
"Don't worry. When you wake up, everything will be over."

That's no good.
I have to tell you something before I sleep——just one thing——
Such thoughts are meaningless, however, as oblivion calls me into its embrace.

When I awoke, the first thing that greeted me was a terrible stink.
Suzumi-san's body was covered in flies, and I could smell the rotten stench that you would expect from a corpse.
The night had ended, but Saya was nowhere to be seen in the morning light.

Aside from the blood-covered floor, the kitchen looked the same as it had in my youth. In contrast, the colors of the living room that had been so soothing to me the day before were now a stark reminder of what a distant world I'd been living in.

Knowing it would be futile, I wandered the house searching for Saya. For almost an hour, I tried in vain to deny reality.

Then I called the police. When the operator answered, I couldn't stop myself from crying. It had been such a long time since I'd heard a human voice other than Saya's, after all.

As became clear later, Suzumi-san had murdered his family before I killed him. Unable to give the police a satisfactory explanation, I was arrested for all three murders. And when they found the remains of Takahata Oumi in my house, the charge became four counts of murder and one count of mutilating a corpse.

During my interrogation, I told them everything exactly as it had happened, in every detail. The detectives didn't believe me, of course, but the psychiatrist who came later did. He had me moved from the jail to a much cleaner white room.

That's right -- this room looks just as stark white to me as it does to everyone else.
In the end, they declared me incapable of answering for my actions.
Everything that had happened to me was real, but was part of a reality that was incompatible with the world outside of this room - so the doctors gave me a tiny space all to myself, a place where I could live in my own reality.

I am sad that I wasn't believed, but I know that it couldn't be helped. In this world, reality is what the vast majority of people say it is. I simply had the misfortune to step outside of that box.
The walls of my room are undeniably white. Thankful for that alone, I will live out the rest of my life.

Everyone said that there had never been any girl named Saya. Well, so be it. Saya was probably never part of their world.

But why shouldn't I be able to hear Saya's voice here, in my room? This is my reality, after all, a continuation of the very real time that we spent together.

How long did I wait with such thoughts floating through my head?

One night, I awoke to the sound of something crawling down the hallway.

The sound would not normally have woken me, but I must have had a premonition that night. Sleeping lighter than usual, I had waited for her arrival - and so I knew instantly that it was her.

"Saya, is that you?"

"....."

She did not answer, but I could feel her outside my door, struggling with some internal conflict.

"Hey, why won't you let me hear your voice?"

"....."

After a long silence, something small was slid through the narrow bars of my peephole.

It was a cell phone, the screen already showing a notepad with freshly-entered text.

"My voice will sound strange to you."

I couldn't suppress a chuckle at Saya's uncharacteristic display of shyness.

"I don't care about that at all," I said, sending the phone back through the bars. "I just want to hear you - see you."

After a short pause, the phone returned to my side.

"Please, let me stay the Saya you remember."

".....I see."

I'd started to suspect that it might be so.

Everything had appeared warped to my eyes - only Saya had looked normal. I'd thought that she was somehow unique.

In truth, however, she had probably been a different kind of "unique" than I'd imagined. It wasn't that my senses hadn't distorted her appearance, but that she had been *so unusual* that she had seemed normal to my twisted mind.

Saya's true form was something other than what I had known. Now, however, I could see her as she really was.

I couldn't blame her for not wanting to reveal herself to me. A girl's heart was not for me to understand. I just had to accept it.

"I tried to say something to you that day, but couldn't——do you remember?"

I slid the phone back to her.

"I was hoping that you'd forgotten."

I smiled wryly at the text on the screen, wondering if she really thought me so heartless.

"How could I forget?"

No one was listening, but still..... it would have been embarassing to speak the rest, so this time I typed it into the phone.

G, H, I——

space——

j, k, l——

m, n, o——

t, u, v——

d, e——

space——

w, x, y——
m, n, o——
t, u——
——I slid the phone back through the slot.

I could sense her trembling outside my door.
I couldn't hear or see her - but still, I knew..... Saya was crying - silently.

".....I wouldn't have cared, you know."
Perhaps my words offered no comfort, spoken so late.
Even so——I wouldn't have cared.
I had wanted to return to my old life, true, but I would have abandoned that wish for Saya. I know that I would have gone with her, hand-in-hand, as far as we could - even to the most forbidden of places.

Saya, too, must have known that I'd been prepared - and she knew, she stopped me from saying those words. If I had spoken that oath, there would have been no going back.
She ended it before that could happen, and vanished from my life.

"I'm sorry. I was a coward."
I look at the words on the screen and shake my head.
"It's not your fault. If I hadn't hesitated then, you would have found the courage, right?"
"I was afraid of you - of how you were changing because of me."
"It's no one's fault."
Saya couldn't bring herself to take everything from me, and I couldn't bring myself to give up everything for her.
We were too weak to find happiness.

"Saya, what will you do now?"
"I'll keep searching for my dad. He'll know how to send me back to where I came from."
"I see..... You want to go home, don't you?"
A short time passed with no words or messages exchanged. I wonder how many times in that brief silence she considered answering "Yes" or "No."

"Yeah."
When the phone finally returned, the characters on the screen seemed strangely uncertain.
"Well, I hope you find your father."
"I'll do my best."
The time had come for our parting. She had chosen her path, and I had given her my blessing. Nothing more needed to be said.

"If you change your mind..... I'll always be here. You can come see me whenever you want."
"I will, thank you.
Goodbye, Fuminori."

I read her final message and returned the phone to the other side.
"Goodbye, Saya."
She gently slapped my door in response, and then I heard the sound of her sliding off down the hallway.

And then I was alone in the silence of the night.

Ever since that day, I have been waiting.

Perhaps Saya really did return to where she came from.

Perhaps she is still wandering somewhere today, looking for her father.
It must be hard. She must be lonely.

When she can no longer stand being alone, she will surely return to me.
I am the only one who will comfort her with kind words, after all.

And so I will wait. Dreaming of her voice and her face, I will wait.

Forever, in my white world.

On that terrifying day when I first opened my eyes after the accident, what would my answer have been?
When I think back on this day many years from now, will I wish that my answer had been different?

It doesn't matter; here, at this moment, there is no doubt in my mind.

END: The White Room

Don't need it anymore:
"Who was that?" I ask Saya, looking at the unidentifiable pieces of the monster.
".....A man living next door. I don't know his name, though."
"Oh, so it was Suzumi-san."
He wasn't a stranger, of course. I'd spoken with him any number of times, and had even been friendly with him before the accident.
And now I've killed him with my own two hands.

——I feel little.
Suzumi-san, the kindly painter who lived next door, is but a distant memory.
The pieces of meat around me, on the other hand, belonged to a loathsome creature whose mere existence was nauseating. Only by killing the vermin could I find relief.
He complained about my yard being filthy or something, didn't he? The swine. It doesn't matter what Saya did. He wasn't worth keeping alive anyway - good riddance.

These are my honest feelings.
Even with a man's blood covering my hands, I am completely calm.
Now I know what I lost in the accident. Saya says that I can take it back, but I know that I cannot. It is gone forever, like the life of the man called Suzumi.

"Hey, Saya..... No doctor could possibly fix my condition, you know."
".....Fuminori?"
"You can do easily what no human is capable of —— you're not human, are you?"
"....."

Saya looks away, her expression unreadable.

Everything appears warped to my eyes - only Saya looks normal. I thought that she was somehow unique.
However, I was wrong. I see her just as I do everything else: as something completely different than what she really is.
Saya is who she is because of who I am —— just like I said a few minutes ago. It's nothing to be surprised about.

I stand and walk over to Suzumi's dismembered corpse.

"I read this manga a long time ago..... It was about a man who recovered from an accident

only to find that he could no longer see the world as it was. Kind of like me."

I finally realize that, even though the stench of these monsters' flesh turns my stomach, their blood and guts smell pretty good - in fact, I know this fragrance quite well.

"He saw people as rocks and robots as beautiful women. And so he fell in love with a robot that wasn't even remotely human."

I retrieve the cleaver, pick up one of the pieces of Suzumi's body, and start removing the skin and tendons.

Ahh, just as I thought.
The stuff underneath looks exactly the same as what Saya and I have been eating.

"Hey, this looks pretty good. Why don't we eat it?"

"Fuminori....."

"Oh, sorry. You're in no mood for that now, are you? Now that it's dead, though, meat is meat. It'd be a waste to throw it away, wouldn't it? Let's get it in the fridge."

"Is that..... alright with you?"

"Sure," I answer easily. There is no longer any room for doubt in my mind, after all.

"Also, his wife and daughter are probably next door. They might cause trouble when he doesn't come home..... I think we'd better hunt them down before they go to the police."

"Is that..... really what you want?" Saya asks again, this time with a trace of fear in her voice. I guess I still haven't convinced her of my sincerity.

"——So, at the end of this manga, the man who fell for something inhuman gave up his own humanity for the sake of their love. A happy ending, don't you think?"

"Fuminori....."

"As long as we're together, I don't need anything more. Everything is fine the way it is."

Tossing the knife and meat aside, I pull Saya into my arms once more.

"I can say it now, can't I? Saya——I love you."

As Saya tries to wipe away the tears that keep flowing from her eyes, I can no longer see any hint of fear in her face.

"I don't want you to regret this..... I don't, but....."

I have sworn my oath, and Saya has accepted it. We have nothing to be afraid of now. Saya will never need to cry again.

".....Even so, I'm happy. I guess I'm pretty selfish, aren't I?"

"I don't mind. I'll always indulge your selfishness, Saya."

Filled with contentment, we exchange a smile and set to the task of cleaning the room.
A single person produces a lot more meat than I expected. Speaking of which, I seem to remember doing something similar before.

"About the other two -- I think he killed them. I heard their screams."

"Well, that makes things easier."

After we finish here, we should go gather the meat from the Suzumi house. That should be enough to hold us for a while.
But, can we pack it all into the refrigerator.....?

Of course. We can just use the refrigerator next door.

"This picture..... I recognize it."

After we finish our labors and get into bed, I show Saya what I found in the Ougai house.

"This one looks familiar. Yeah, I've definitely been there."

The photograph that Saya has selected from the three is the one with a Tochigi Prefecture address written on the back.

"This is..... a house, right? I see trees and..... mountains?"

"Yeah. Wow, Fuminori, you can see pictures now?"

"A little."

At the outset of my ordeal, I had to depend entirely on my sense of distance to decipher what I saw. The houses in front of me, the mountains far behind them, the clouds high above.....
Only distance and scale told me what they were.
Photographs and other flat images used to be completely incomprehensible to me. Recently, however, I've gotten better at understanding what things are by their shape; I know what the mountains and sky look like, for example, and how they are different from buildings.

Each of the three pictures shows a similar scene: a lone house in the middle of a forest. They must be vacation retreats or something.

"Dad called it his cabin. He said that no one would find us there."

"Hmm....."

If the addresses on the back of the photos belong to each building, then they probably are excellent places to stay hidden from prying eyes. But why three?

The dates are pretty old, and it seems odd that they were all taken within a few days of each other.
Maybe he was taking photos of houses he was thinking of buying in order to determine which would be the best candidate for his hideaway.
And Saya only recognizes one of the houses ——— so Ougai decided on the house in Tochigi Prefecture, S Town.

Checking the location on a roadmap of the Kanto area, I find that it's about three hours out of Tokyo by car.

"Do you think your father will be there?"

"I tried calling him, but he didn't answer. I don't think he's there."

"But he might have stopped by recently."

The way I see it, the only way out of this deadlock is to take whatever chance we have, no matter how small. The probability of there being a clue to Professor Ougai's whereabouts in his villa is very low..... but it's not zero.

"I think I'll check this place out tomorrow."

"Eh～?" Saya pouts.

I wasn't expecting Saya to object.

"But..... isn't it far away?"

"It'll only take about half a day to go there, check it out, and come back."

"I'll have to stay home by myself while you're gone?"

So that's what it is..... Slightly exasperated, I smile and rub Saya's head.

"Be a little patient, okay? You want to find your father too, don't you?"

"....."

After a brief silence, during which her expression is hard to decipher, Saya timidly looks up at me and says, "Hey, Fuminori..... Let's forget about Dad."

"—Eh?"

I'm completely blindsided by this.

"Forget about him..... But, he's your father, right? Aren't you worried about him?"

"Not anymore," Saya says, coming closer to feel my warmth. "I have you now."

"I call him Dad, but he's not really my father. He taught me a lot, and probably loved me in his own way, but..... you're kinder and warmer."

Saya's words make me happy, but —— I also feel the loneliness in them.

"Are you really alright with just me?"

"Yeah. You don't like it just being the two of us?"

"I do, but..... I also want to meet Professor Ougai."

Having finally figured out how to explain my feelings, I continue, "I want to get to know you better, Saya. If there's someone who knows more about you than me, I have to meet them."

"Hmm, I see....."

Saya doesn't seem angry, but she does tilt her head quizzically, as though my thoughts are strange to her.

"And I also want to..... Yeah, I'm going to check it out tomorrow."

Another plan has started to form in my mind, one separate from the search for Professor Ougai. If I find the professor there, great; if I don't —— well, I think I can find another use for his mountain retreat.

"I know you'll be lonely, Saya, but try to bear it for a little while."

"Okay," she nods, then looks questioningly into my eyes.

"Fuminori..... You really want a family and friends, more people you can spend time with, don't you?"

"Well, that would be more fun, yeah....."

Fearing that Saya will start sulking, I hurriedly add, "But don't get me wrong. Even if I could have lots of friends and family, you'll always be special to me."

"I know. Hehehe, thanks."

Giggling, Saya rubs her cheek against mine.

"I'll find something to make you happy —— something just for you."

Today, all of Kouji's classes were in the morning.

On his way to meet Yoh for lunch after his final lecture, Kouji suddenly gets a phone call in the middle of the hallway.

Without thinking, he reaches to his belt for his new camera-phone, but curses when he realizes that the ringtone is coming from the old phone in his bag.

He bought a camera-phone to see what all the rage was about, but couldn't bring himself to discard his simple, much easier to use old phone, so he ended up walking around with both. He hasn't transferred his contacts list yet, and calls still come to his old phone from people who don't know the new number.

When he finally fishes the phone from his bag, the name he sees on the display sends a chill up his spine.

Fuminori.

Why now? What does he want?

It's hard for Kouji to be happy about a call from Fuminori now, long after he gave up on such a thing ever being possible.

"—Yes?"

"Hey, Kouji. You're done with class for today, right?"

"......Yeah."

Of course Fuminori would know that Kouji always has a lot of free time on Thursday afternoons.

"I have something to talk to you about. Can you come to the parking lot?"

"Now?"

"Yeah, I'll be waiting."

Fuminori hangs up without another word.

What's gotten into him? What does he want? Kouji wonders as he sticks the phone into his jacket pocket.

This sudden change is disturbing after a week of Fuminori clearly trying to avoid both Kouji and Yoh.

Maybe he's finally ready to talk..... In which case, Kouji should probably consider this a good thing.

However, he can't shake his unease completely.

"—Did I keep you waiting?"

"Nah."

In the parking lot, Kouji finds Fuminori leaning against the fender of Kouji's Accord.

This is the first time he's seen Fuminori since the night at the mysterious abandoned house. It's been a long time since they've spoken face-to-face in the light - perhaps that's why Kouji senses something strange in Fuminori's expression.

He's not sure what, exactly, but something has definitely changed.

"I think I told you before that I'm currently looking for information on a man named Ougai."

"—So I've heard."

"Well, it's starting to get more complicated. It looks like I can't handle it by myself after all."

Fuminori seems——more relaxed than before. He used to be tense all the time, like he was terrified of something, but now his expression is calm, and he's even wearing what resembles a sheepish grin.

"So I need your help, Kouji."

——Nevertheless, some instinct is telling Kouji that Fuminori's changes are not at all for the better.

"Why the sudden change of heart?" Kouji asks, keeping his expression neutral to conceal his suspicion.

"You're involved too, aren't you?" Fuminori responds coolly. His smile, unreadable as ever, offers no glimpse of his true motives.

"You searched Professor Ougai's house after me, didn't you? It's a waste of time for us to look for him separately. It'll be more efficient if we team up."

"....."

Why?

Why does there seem to be malice, thick and viscous, lurking behind Fuminori's smile?

"Anyway, I need your car today. Mind driving?"

"Well, no....."

Fuminori's car was destroyed in the accident, so Kouji isn't surprised that he'd need a lift.

Kouji unlocks his Accord and gestures for Fuminori to take the passenger seat, then gets behind the wheel and starts the engine.

"......Well? Where are we going?"

"North Tochigi, near the Nasu Heights."

"Tochigi!?"

Even Kouji can't conceal his surprise at this.

"Here's the address," Fuminori says, handing Kouji a photo with an address on the back. "I want you to find this building."

Rather than be angry at Fuminori, Kouji is simply amazed that he seriously expects to be driven over a hundred kilometers.

"If we leave now, we should get there by evening, right?"

"......Yeah, maybe."

Kouji sighs heavily, tapping the steering wheel as he calms himself down. Now that he's come this far, the only thing he can do is see his friend's craziness through to the end.

"Is this a vacation home or something?"

"Probably. Professor Ougai should be there."

Kouji isn't looking forward to meeting the owner of that strange house, but he's even more uneasy about letting Fuminori go alone.

It looks like he just has to grin and bear it.

"We might not get back until night."

"Sorry for the trouble."

"......Don't mention it."

Kouji drives out of the parking lot, leaving the rest of what he'd planned to say unspoken.

Fuminori's smile seems somehow wrong, like an emotionless mask glued to his face.

Yoh finds herself sitting alone in the cafeteria, searching for a familiar face as her lunch cools on the table in front of her.

It's not as though she and Kouji planned to meet, and it wouldn't be at all unusual for him to have another engagement. When he hadn't been able to show up in the past, Oumi and Fuminori would pick up the slack.

But neither Oumi nor Fuminori are here anymore.

Yoh puts down her chopsticks, her appetite ruined by the lack of company - and even more so by the anxiety eating at her.

She knows that Oumi's absence isn't because of some illness or unavoidable business.

She doesn't know why Fuminori suddenly turned against her.

If Kouji were here, she could count on him to distract her from her worries with some idle conversation.

Now that she's all by herself, Yoh becomes keenly aware of how little tolerance she has for loneliness.

She begins to feel paranoid, like the world itself is plotting to steal everything from her.

What exactly is going on here?

Where has Oumi gone? Is Fuminori really uninvolved?

Or is he the key to this mystery, like Kouji and Dr. Tanbo suspect?

Yoh will never forget what happened last Thursday. Alone and without an outlet for her pain after Fuminori verbally eviscerated her, Yoh had been lucky enough to catch sight of Kouji. Concerned, he had listened to her and, although he could hardly make her problem go away, his kindness had comforted her.

At the same time, Oumi had been on her way to Fuminori's house..... and she hasn't been heard from since.

Yoh has only been aware of Fuminori's connection to Oumi's disappearance since yesterday, when the truth had been revealed during their visit to the T University Hospital.

What if.....

Yoh considers a new possibility, trying to find the answer to the question: Why did Oumi suddenly decide to go to Fuminori's house?

What if it hadn't been a coincidence that Yoh had run into Kouji that day?

What if Kouji and Oumi both knew what had happened between her and Fuminori, and had decided to act separately?

Oumi might have seen the confrontation in the courtyard; she might have been eavesdropping. It's not unthinkable.

"....."

As the idea forms in her mind, Yoh feels as though something is tearing apart her body from the inside.

It's only a possibility, but if it's true —— then whatever happened to Oumi is Yoh's responsibility too, isn't it?

"....."

Yoh clutches her head, groaning in agony.

The food she brought out on her tray is now cold - not that she would have eaten it anyway.

Despite the frustration and anxiety tormenting her, Yoh is unable to act on her own. She has never been very flexible, nor is she known for her sharp intuition. She hasn't the slightest idea how to respond to this situation.

If Oumi were here, she would probably tell Yoh to think positive and trust her instincts. Yoh has always depended on her best friend's energy - now that Oumi is gone, Yoh realizes just how weak and useless she is.

Powerless to stop herself, she can only sink deeper and deeper into a vicious cycle of self-loathing.

The sudden sound of her phone ringing is what pulls her back from the brink of despair.

It's a text message. There's no title, and the sender is——

"Oumi-chan!?" Yoh cries out in shock.

The message itself, however, is even more baffling.

"Do you want to know about Sakisaka Fuminori? If so, come to his house alone. Tell no one."

"....."

The message bears no trace of Oumi's personality, but Yoh can't deny that it was sent from Oumi's phone.

She takes a deep breath to calm herself before typing her reply, taking care that excitement doesn't cause her fingers to slip.

"Is that you, Oumi-chan? Where are you?"
Yoh presses send —— the screen shows that her message was received successfully.

As she waits for a reply, her mind fills with questions.
Is someone else using Oumi's phone to send text messages? If so, why to her?
Something suddenly occurs to her.
She and Oumi have exchanged countless messages, many of which contained the sort of embarrassing confessions that close female friends share. At times when her hidden feelings for Fuminori grew too strong to contain, Yoh often put them into words for Oumi to read.

Did Oumi put a password on her phone? Even if she had, the person who sent the message

was obviously able to unlock it - which means that whoever it is has full access to the messages that she and Oumi have sent to each other.
"Do you want to know about Sakisaka Fuminori?"
Yoh reads the strange message one more time. Whoever sent it must believe that Yoh has an interest in Fuminori.
The phone suddenly rings again, startling Yoh, but she quickly recovers and looks at the screen. There's no title, and the sender is still Takahata Oumi.
"I'll tell you everything when we meet. Come alone. Tell no one."

It's not Oumi. She would never try to scare Yoh with such a mean-spirited prank.

Anxiety has brought Yoh almost to tears. Her mind isn't made to deal with such an incomprehensible situation.
Who is using Oumi's phone and promising to reveal Fuminori's secrets? Who is it!?
Yoh is helpless on her own. She desperately wants advice from Kouji - from anyone. She even starts to dial Kouji's cell, but a sudden suspicion stops her.
The sender might be somewhere nearby, watching her at this very moment. A cold chill runs down her spine as she looks furtively around the cafeteria.

"Come alone. Tell no one."

The lifeless characters on the screen are like a knife against her throat.

However —— Yoh clutches her phone and forces her heart to stop pounding.
Isn't this cowardice exactly what she was just cursing herself so mercilessly for?
Doesn't she want to know what she's capable of? Doesn't she want to do more than just sit and wait?

Yoh realizes that her hand holding the phone is shaking.
How easy it would be to just give in to her cowardice, to convince herself that everything - even Oumi and Fuminori - is beyond her reach.
That is what she truly wants. Even if it means abandoning all sense of dignity or loyalty, she wants to flee from the unknowable.

However —— she also knows that even escape is beyond her.
Yoh understands herself well. She knows that, no matter how far she runs, regret and self-loathing will consume her after everything has fallen to pieces.

In the end, Yoh is unable to overcome her cowardice alone. She lacks both the willpower and the courage to run.

The silence of the afternoon neighborhood seems somehow forbidding.
A stink is in the air, as though someone's garbage has been left out for a long time.
Even this perfectly normal residential area appears ominous to Yoh in her current state. She feels like she's standing in the middle of a ghost town, where everyone in the surrounding houses has died.....

Yoh pushes her fear aside and presses the buzzer on the Sakisaka house's front gate.
She didn't see Fuminori in class today. Is he at home?
He couldn't be the one who sent those awful messages, could he!? —— she doesn't want to even consider the possibility, so she forces the unwelcome thought from her mind.

There's no response from the intercom.
Yoh doesn't know, of course, that Oumi stood in the same place one week ago, staring at the silent intercom with the same confusion that Yoh is experiencing now.

Yoh, however, is not forced to wait as Oumi was.
The phone in her pocket suddenly rings, catching her completely off guard.

"......!"
It's another untitled text message from Oumi's phone.

"Come in. The door is open."

Yoh looks around quickly, a shiver running through her as she realizes that she's being watched.
Searching fearfully for her observer, Yoh spots movement out of the corner of her eye. On the second floor of the Sakisaka house, a tightly-drawn window curtain just fluttered slightly.
The watcher - the person who has been sending the messages - is inside the house.
Only now does Yoh realize that every other window has its storm shutters completely closed.

No matter what happens inside, no one will ever know.

This time, she is nearly overwhelmed by the intense urge to run away and never look back. However, the terror she feels towards the invisible eyes staring at her is many times more powerful.
She has nowhere to run.
Yoh bursts into tears, unable to take one step forward or back.
The phone rings again in her hand, as though demanding that she enter the house at once.
She steps through the gate, her legs so shaky that they hardly seem connected to her.
When she enters the house, an undeniable stench assaults her nostrils.
The house is dark, even though it is the middle of the day.
Fuminori must be out, as his shoes are not in the vestibule. However——

Yoh catches sight of a different pair of shoes stuffed behind the shoe cupboard.
They look familiar, so she pulls them out of the shadows for a closer look. As soon as she recognizes them, her mind tries desperately to find a way to deny reality.

They are definitely the same as Oumi's favorite shoes. Yoh has seen her wearing them any number of times. However, that doesn't mean that Oumi is here in this house. They might belong to someone entirely different, someone who bought the same shoes from the same store. There's no way Oumi could be here——

In a sudden flash of insight, Yoh presses the most frequently used speed-dial button on the phone still in her tightly clenched fist.
The phone dials Oumi's number.
It takes only a second for the signal to reach the nearest relay station, and then.....
A familiar melody echoes through the house - the unmistakable sound of Oumi's phone.
It's coming from the second floor. Someone must still be up there in the room with the moving curtains.
Oumi's phone only rings for a few moments..... and then it stops, as whoever is holding it realizes Yoh's intentions. For the first time, Yoh feels the definite presence of her formless guide.

".....Who's there?"
She gathers her courage and calls out into the house, but there is no response. Whoever it is must not want to be seen.

Swallowing hard, Yoh walks down the hallway to the staircase.

Maybe it's Oumi. Maybe it's Fuminori. Surely it's just the two of them playing a prank on her. Kouji might even be here with them.

Yoh's mind fills with comforting images. Whether or not they are possible, she wants to believe in them. Otherwise, she would not be able to take another step.

"Oumi-chan..... is that you? Sakisaka-kun, are you there?"

As she climbs the stairs one at a time, Yoh calls out in a voice choked with tears.

When they see her sobbing, they'll probably laugh and make fun of her. Let them; it would be the happiest moment of her life. She just wants this torment to end as quickly as possible.

She tries to move faster, but her trembling legs force her to move at an agonizingly slow pace, dragging the crushing silence out even longer. With each second, she begs for release from this nightmare.

After enduring what seems like an eternity of stillness, Yoh finds herself standing in the second floor hallway.

No sound greets her. There is only the gloom, brimming with silent malice.

"Oumi-chan..... Oumi-chaaan....."

She shuffles forward, calling out in a weak voice.

"Come out already, please..... I can't..... take this anymore....."

The door in front of her is half open. It probably leads to the room that overlooks the front gate.

Yoh watches helplessly from a corner of her mind as her body, seeming to move of its own volition, slowly opens the door.

The room is empty.

The damp, stinking air clings to Yoh's skin.

"Please..... stop this....."

She is at her limit, unable to take a single step more.

Her spirit has been completely crushed -- perhaps her tormenter was waiting for this very moment.

Something grabs Yoh's arms from behind —— something flexible and strong, like slime-covered rubber.

As the thing binds her limbs, fingerlike appendages tear roughly through her blouse and force their way inside.

Yoh screams at the top of her lungs, amazed that she still has the strength to do so. Responding to her distress, primal energy surges through her body as she flails wildly, trying to free herself.

However, the grip of the thing behind her remains unbreakable.

With escape impossible, Yoh can only scream even louder as something cold and wet slips under her bra and wraps itself around her breasts.

Yoh is helpless to resist as the invader mercilessly squeezes her breasts and sucks at her nipples, which have gone stiff with fear under the horrifying onslaught. Her ears are filled with the sound of something slimy sliding over her skin and between her breasts.

As the loathsome assault on her breasts continues, the unimaginable terror threatens to drive Yoh utterly mad. Her throat is already raw from screaming, and now she can't even breathe as she struggles desperately against her attacker.

Suddenly, the thing releases its grip on her breasts and pulls out from under her bra.
Yoh falls to the floor, unable to support herself on her unresponsive legs.
Having used up all of the strength that her body had held in reserve, she now feels like a marionette with its strings cut.

The creature that just grabbed her from behind is still here, lurking in a dark corner of the room. Yoh can feel it watching her, but she can't bring herself to turn around. She knows full well that seeing it will likely destroy the last vestiges of her sanity.
From close by comes the muffled tapping of buttons being pressed.

Yoh hears a cheerful electronic sound, terribly out of place in this room, and sees the phone in her hand blink coldly. A new text message has arrived.
She is powerless to stop herself from reading the characters on the screen.

"You're pretty, and your breasts are so soft and big. Your body must be quite useful for tempting males."

Now she has her answer. The messages from Oumi's phone were sent by the thing that just mauled Yoh's breasts.....

"God....."

Yoh curls up into a tiny, sobbing ball, unable to raise her voice or even move.

"Oh God..... please save me....."

The creature hiding in the darkness makes a burbling sound.
Yoh somehow understands that it is laughing contemptuously at her.

"That must be how you tried to tempt Fuminori. You tried to steal him from me, didn't you? You thief."

Something cold seizes Yoh's ankles, then travels slowly up her legs until it has covered her entire lower body.
Some primal female instinct tells her exactly what will happen to her now.
She will be raped, powerless to resist a fate worse than death.

"Stop....." she pleads feebly, even though she knows that there is no hope that the inhuman creature will be merciful.
"Please..... not that....."

She hears its bubbling laughter again.
The thing is enjoying her sorrow - her despair.

Yoh no longer has the strength to push away the monster on top of her. She is only able to shiver in revulsion as the cold, slimy thing covers her body.
Her sight grows dim as her consciousness sinks deeper and deeper into a black, swamp-like abyss.

Her breasts are toyed with, her nipples are sucked on, and a weight pushes itself between her legs - but it all seems to be happening far away.

——I won't kill you——

Though her mind is now barely functioning, Yoh hears a voice whispering to her inside her head. It is the voice of a young girl, sweet and sinister, with the cruel innocence of a child gleefully plucking the wings off of butterflies.

——Instead, I'll let you share in our happiness. Rejoice, Yoh. We'll love you to death——
The soft voice is a stark contrast to the unyielding strength that drives irresistably into Yoh's core.
The pain is sharp and savage, greater than anything she has ever felt before.

It should be unbearable, but there is no longer enough left of Yoh's mind to even recognize it as pain.
Oh.....

While she stares blankly at the thing slithering deeper and deeper into her body, an idle thought floats through her fading consciouness.

.....I still..... haven't been kissed, have I.....

It has begun to snow by the time they pass Utsunomiya on the Tohoku Motorway.

"I hope the roads aren't covered in snow....."

Sitting in the passenger seat, Fuminori is gazing out of the frosted window in silence. He's been in this trancelike state for almost an hour now.

Taking advantage of his inattention, Kouji stares unabashedly at Fuminori from the corner of his eye.

He still doesn't understand the true meaning of the danger signals that he's been getting from Fuminori.

Fuminori has stopped avoiding him, and he's even looking Kouji in the eye when he talks. So why does Fuminori seem even more distant now than he did when he was trying to push Kouji and the others away?

Fuminori is noticeably relaxed as he stares off into space, but his gaze never wavers. It's as though he is focused on a single, definite future that he has chosen to bring about, one that has no place for the needs or wants of others.

Right now, Fuminori is complete. Kouji can't help but feel that beneath his bland exterior is a core of solid steel that no one can touch.

"——About Oumi," Kouji says suddenly, as though trying to gauge Fuminori's reaction.

"It's been a week since she disappeared, and we still haven't heard from her."

"I see," Fuminori replies curtly, still staring into the distance.

"I'm worried. What could've happened to her?"

"....."

Fuminori's tone is completely emotionless, as though Kouji just asked him a question about the weather or the condition of the mountain roads near their destination.

"I asked you this before, but..... You don't have any idea what happened to her?"

"No, not at all," Fuminori answers in exactly the same way that he did when Kouji first questioned him following Oumi's disappearance.

".....It's like you don't give a damn."

"That's not true."

Finally Fuminori shows some emotion, looking as though he can't believe Kouji could think such a thing.

"She disappeared on the way to my house, didn't she? Of course I'm worried."

Sudden frustration wells up inside Kouji. If possible, he'd like to beat Fuminori until he reveals everything that's going on inside that head of his.

Kouji and Oumi were lovers, and he's worried sick about her. To have his concern brushed off so coldly would be unbearable even coming from a complete stranger; but from Fuminori, who was his best friend, it's——

Fuminori never used to be this callous.

Even if Kouji tried to interrogate him, he'd probably never find out what changed him so completely.

If Fuminori were still just hiding inside the shell he'd erected around himself after the accident, Kouji might have been able to get some answers out of him. With this sly, evasive Fuminori, however..... there's nothing Kouji can do. Fuminori will never reveal his true intentions - not to anyone.

All that's left, then, is for Kouji to discover the truth by himself.

"Oumi was going to talk to you about Tsukuba, you know."

"——Oh?"

Fuminori smiles bitterly at the mention of Tsukuba's name, perhaps feeling sympathy for her pain. To Kouji, however, it seems as though he is coldly pitying some inferior creature.

"About Tsukuba-san..... I wouldn't know what to say. To be honest, it's been hard to talk to her after what happened."

"....."

Unbelievable.

If Fuminori's feelings for Yoh were really this ice cold, then he would have rejected her when she confessed to him. But he didn't - or, at least, the Fuminori before the accident didn't.

Once again, Kouji can't help but wonder if the man who looks like his friend is really a different person who only possesses the memories of Sakisaka Fuminori.

When they get off the West Nasu Flats Interchange, the snow that Kouji was worried about has stopped falling. This area must already be getting a lot of snow, however, as the nearby mountains are covered in white beneath the trees.

By the time they turn off the national highway and enter the mountains, road conditions are

already bad enough for Kouji to regret having forgotten tire chains.

Nevertheless, he continues to power his Accord up the precarious slopes with only a road map for a guide.

In a place like this, an address alone isn't enough to pinpoint a location. The only choice is to drive down every road, including private roads that aren't even on the map, while searching for something that matches the photograph.

"Is there really a vacation home in a place like this?"

"It's far from prying eyes. That must be why Professor Ougai chose this place."

"....."

The more he hears about Ougai, the less Kouji wants to meet him.

Fuminori is the one who spots the narrow road half-hidden in the trees.
It's practically an animal trail, overgrown with weeds that are tall and strong enough to withstand the weight of the snow.

"Is this..... really a road?"

Kouji stops the car and sticks his head out of the window to stare into the dark forest, but he can't see where the path leads through the tightly-packed trees.

"How does it look to you?"

Fuminori hands Kouji the photo, which he compares to the mountain ridges visible beyond the trees.

".....Yeah, it's definitely the right angle."

"Let's check it out."

Fuminori's tone is as flat as always, but there is a quiet intensity in his voice that leaves no room for argument.

Kouji is worried that his car's suspension won't be able to handle the terrain, but there's no turning back now. Shifting into second gear, he drives down the frozen road.

The sun sets early at high altitudes.
As the car creeps up the mountain path, Kouji catches glimpses through the trees of the gradually darkening sky.
The forest is completely still, with no sound save for the rumble of the Accord's engine and the crackle of snow and brush being crushed beneath its tires. Fuminori is once again staring silently through the front window.
In the ominous silence, Kouji feels the same faint chill that he felt when standing before Ougai's suburban home. It feels wrong, as though some primal instinct is warning him that he is travelling deeper and deeper into another world.

After some time, a blocky shape suddenly appears amid the trees, standing out against the twilight sky.

"....."

Kouji turns off the car and compares the structure in front of him to the picture in his hand - a

perfect match.
Before he can tell Fuminori, however, his silent friend is already out of the car.

"Hey....."

Realizing that it's pointless to call out to him, Kouji shakes his head, grabs the flashlight from the glove compartment, and follows Fuminori across the snow-covered front yard to the cabin.

The photo must not have been taken recently, as the old, run-down cabin before them has clearly been left to the mercy of the elements for some time.

The front door appears to be locked, but Fuminori kicks it down without a second thought. Kouji just watches, knowing that nothing he could say now would matter.

All of the windows are shut with heavy curtains, throwing the inside of the cabin into thick gloom.
Fuminori turns on his own flashlight and starts rummaging through the cabin without regard for its owner's privacy.
Kouji is reluctant to do the same, but it's obvious that this mountain retreat has been abandoned for a long time, just like the house in Tokyo. Seeing no point in being considerate now, he goes to search a different room.

Soon after entering the cabin, however, he realizes that their search is meaningless.
There's nothing inside but the bare necessities of life. Some rooms are even completely empty, save for a thick layer of dust covering the floor.
Of what few pieces of furniture are present, more than half appear to have never been used. There's an empty chest of drawers without a single scratch or handprint, but bearing the telltale signs of mold and moisture damage.

The condition of the cabin is eerie, though in a different way than the filthiness of the house in the city. It's like someone put together a mockup of a home and then left it to decay.
The only signs that anyone lived here are found in the toilet, the bath, the kitchen..... and in the bedroom.
It appears that the cabin was never used for anything but eating and sleeping.

Beneath the darkened sky, the snow-covered land itself seems to be glowing with a cold, white light. The scene is like something out of a fairytale, but to Kouji it only serves as an unpleasant reminder that he has stepped outside of the reality that he knows.
Next to the front porch is a plain wooden door half buried in the ground. It's locked, of course, but Kouji sees no reason for restraint after what Fuminori did to the front door.

The door offers surprisingly little resistance to Kouji's heavy kick, breaking open easily to reveal a set of concrete stairs leading down into a pitch-black basement.

"....."
Kouji would prefer to leave searching such a suspicious place to Fuminori, but it's not like he can just ask him to do so.
With the beam of his flashlight leading the way, Kouji descends into the chilly darkness.

.....There turns out to be nothing in the basement but a storage room and a boiler, exactly what one would expect to find in an isolated mountain cabin.

The few packages of preserved food sitting on the shelves have long since passed their expiration dates, and the boiler doesn't appear to have been used in years.
To Kouji, Ougai's mountain home seems to have been abandoned longer than the house in Tokyo.

Was Fuminori simply mistaken when he said that Ougai might be here? Or..... was he lying from the beginning?

Not sure what to do next, Kouji goes back up the stairs and walks around the outside of the cabin - and there he finds the backyard.

It's in much worse condition than the front yard, having already been mostly reclaimed by the forest. It must have been abandoned even when the cabin was still in use.
The remnants of a woodshed lie in the yard, the mushrooms growing on it speaking to how much time has passed since its collapse. Next to the rotten logs, however, stands a circle of stone that has not yet succumbed to the elements.

A well.

It has no bucket or pulley, of course, and when Kouji carefully approaches and looks into it, he sees that the water is no longer flowing. It's probably less than ten meters deep, depending on how much mud is piled up inside of it.
Kouji's search of the cabin has revealed nothing of interest, inside or out.

Leaning against the edge of the well, Kouji wonders why Ougai bought this remote home deep in the mountains, and what he was doing here.
As far as Kouji can tell, there's no sign that more than one person stayed here for any length of time.

"It's far from prying eyes——"
Fuminori's words play back in Kouji's head. Could this have been some sort of secret refuge? Or could it have been used as a place to keep things hidden from the world?
If so, that would explain why there's nothing to suggest that whoever lived here did anything more than eat and sleep.

Kouji suddenly remembers the doctor he met yesterday at T University. Maybe she'd know something.

He takes out his phone and calls up the newly-stored number. There's barely a signal, but it manages to get through.

Kouji's hopes are soon dashed, however, when his call goes straight to Dr. Tanbo's voice mail.

He considers calling back later, but realizes that it would be hard to talk to her with Fuminori around. Fuminori would not be at all pleased to find out that Kouji and Yoh went to see his doctor.

Kouji decides that he'd better tell the doctor what he can while he's still alone.

"Hello, this is Tonoh Kouji. Thank you for your help the other day....."

Kouji leaves a clear and concise message, explaining that he was brought by Fuminori to Professor Ougai's mountain retreat, giving the address, and asking for confirmation that the

property actually belongs to Ougai.

"......I'll call again when I get back to Tokyo. Goodbye."

After hanging up, Kouji thinks back to their visit to the hospital. Is Dr. Tanbo actually investigating like she said she would? The secret about Professor Ougai that she adamantly refused to reveal is still weighing on his mind.

He talked to Yoh about it on the way home, but they were unable to decide whether the doctor could really be trusted.

——Speaking of which, how is Yoh doing? Kouji hasn't seen her today.

He didn't say a word to her about his trip to Tochigi. She might be worried, especially so soon after Oumi's disappearance.

Thinking to check up on her, Kouji dials Yoh's number..... and is surprised when it keeps ringing longer than it usually does.

Did she forget her phone somewhere?

Just as he's about to give up, the call connects.

The first thing Kouji hears is a strange sound. It's not signal interference, but some kind of wet, distorted noise —— like the voiceless groans, or perhaps sobs, of someone far away.

No, these really are sobs. Whoever is on the other side is crying in misery.

"T-Tsukuba? Is that you!?"

"......Who.....?"

There's a response, but is that really Tsukuba's voice? It's too twisted with agony for Kouji to tell.

Panic surges through Kouji as he realizes that something is terribly wrong.

"It's Kouji, Tonoh Kouji! Tsukuba, is that you? Where are you!?"

After a short period of nothing but pained moans, words start coming through the speaker one by one, as though each takes an act of will.

"......I was..... attacked..... by a monster..... and now..... there's..... something wrong..... with my..... body....."

"Wha..... What happened!? Hey, you alright!?"

Yoh must be delirious or something, because Kouji can't understand a thing that she's saying. Her gasps and wheezes, however, are enough to tell him that she's in unimaginable pain.

"I'm..... rotting away..... my skin..... is melting..... My..... ear just..... came off....."

Unable to make any sense of this, Kouji feels despair seizing his heart in an iron grip.

What the hell is happening to Yoh now, over a hundred kilometers away?

Only her voice gives Kouji any hint of what she's going through, and——there's nothing he can do for her.

".....Help me..... Tonoh-kun..... This..... This isn't..... how my..... fingers..... are supposed..... to look....."

"Tsukuba, call the cops! Call for help!"

".....No..... I can't..... let anyone..... see me..... like this....."

Yoh suddenly breaks off into a violent hacking cough, as though she's trying to expel something filling her throat.

"Tsukuba!!"

Kouji screams into the phone, his reason overwhelmed by the unimaginable horror that is befalling Yoh.

——Which is why he is unable to react quickly when the phone is suddenly knocked out of his hand, and also why he didn't notice Fuminori sneaking up on him until it was too late.

"Wha——"

Fuminori seizes Kouji's lower jaw with his right hand, cutting off Kouji's angry shout. Kouji can hardly believe the strength of the smaller man's grip.

Kouji's biggest mistake was leaning back against the well. With Fuminori forcing him backwards over the edge, there is nothing Kouji can grab onto. He can only flail his arms vainly against the air.

Kouji soon loses his balance completely.

He feels a terrifying weightlessness as the world spins before his eyes.

Before he can realize that he's been pushed into the well, his back strikes something with tremendous force.

He thrashes wildly as cold, dirty water fills his mouth and freezes him to the core. Only when his fingers find the wall of the well is he able to regain his sense of direction and right himself.

On his hands and knees in the mud, Kouji vomits the filthy water out of his lungs.

Although the mud cushioned his fall, he has more important things to worry about than being properly thankful for his good luck.

"F-Fuminori——" he tries to shout, but it comes out as a hoarse groan made even harder to understand by the echoes bouncing off of the walls.

Fuminori's maniacal laughter on the other hand, is clearly audible even at the bottom of the well.

"Sorry for interrupting your phone call," he says scornfully. "Here, I'll return this."

Fuminori tosses Kouji's phone into the well. Kouji catches it just before it hits him in the face, but he finds that the battery pack has been removed, rendering it useless.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

This is no joke. It's a miracle that Kouji is uninjured. If he'd landed the wrong way, he could easily have died.

Wait, just because I'm not hurt doesn't mean that——

Kouji feels around the inside of the well, searching for something to hold on to, but the mud-covered stone offers no purchase. It's obvious that he won't be able to get out without help.

"If you'd died on impact, you wouldn't have had to suffer. You really have no luck, Kouji."

"Hey..... are you——"

Are you serious? Kouji was about to ask, but the pieces have finally come together in his head.

Today's sudden change in Fuminori's attitude - that smile that had always seemed somehow malevolent. Fuminori hadn't been smiling at Kouji, but at the thought of his friend's death.

".....Why.....?"

Even though he recognizes what has happened, he can't understand it.

Why would Fuminori, who was supposed to be his friend, try to kill him?

True, Fuminori had wanted Kouji to stay out of his business - but is that really a motive for murder?

"It's not that I needed you dead right now, exactly, but you could have become trouble later on. So I figured that I might as well take advantage of this secluded place to, well....."

"'Might as well'..... You're doing this on a whim!?"

"Do you really need a reason to die?" Fuminori replies coldly, as though he's truly amazed that Kouji would ask such a thing.

"Do you think you're special, Kouji? People die for no reason at all, you know. My parents did, and I almost followed them."

"Y-you're crazy!"

"If you want a reason so badly, come up with one yourself. You'll have plenty of time down there, won't you?"

Fuminori disappears from view, leaving Kouji alone in the darkness with nothing to connect him to the outside world.

"Fuminori! Hey! Fuminori!!"

Kouji shouts at the top of his lungs, knowing beyond a doubt that, if Fuminori leaves, all hope of rescue will vanish with him. No one will ever hear him calling for help from the bottom of a mountain well.

"It's Tsukuba! She's in trouble! Hey, Fuminori! Listen! Let me out of here!!"

In his desperation, Kouji no longer comprehends the futility of begging Fuminori for mercy.

No god or devil will answer him - his only hope is that Fuminori will have a change of heart. As though praying for a miracle, he keeps calling Fuminori's name.

Eventually, the sky becomes as dark as the bottom of the well, making it impossible for Kouji to make out the edge of the opening. He has long since lost track of how many hours he has been screaming.

Nevertheless, he continues to scream, for he knows that the despair silence will bring will kill him.

I feel great.

This is the satisfaction of having found the perfect solution to a difficult problem - the feeling that you get when the last piece of the puzzle slides smoothly into place.

I have killed a man, and no one will ever know.

The path back to civilization seems awfully long, but neither the cold nor the exhaustion can ruin my good mood as I walk by myself down the snow-covered mountain road.

I was tempted to use Kouji's car, but that would have introduced a flaw into the plan. That cabin is the perfect place to hide both Kouji's corpse and his car, after all.
The plan had formed in my mind the moment that I'd looked at the address and realized how remote the location was. Even if I couldn't find anything to lead me to Professor Ougai, his absence would at least prove that the cabin had been utterly abandoned - in which case, it would be the perfect spot to take care of a problem. I knew that coming all the way out to Tochigi wouldn't be a waste of time.

I didn't even need to use the meat cleaver that's hidden in my clothes. A dry well - it's like Fate itself provided me with the perfect setting.

That idiot didn't even realize how dangerous it was to be leaning against the well like that, and his phone call distracted him enough that I was able to sneak up on him unseen.

Anyway, one of the people whose questions might have caused trouble for Saya and me has vanished completely from the face of the Earth. All that's left is to eliminate the other one.

Tsukuba Yoh - I mustn't underestimate her just because she's not as aggressive as Kouji. Even she should be able to see a connection between the disappearances of Tonoh Kouji and Takahata Oumi.

In a way, I should be thankful that it was Yoh whom Kouji was talking to next to the well.

If he'd reported our location to a third party, I'd have to track down and eliminate that person

too.

I'm a little worried about what they were discussing, but, judging by how Kouji was yelling unintelligibly into the phone, they probably weren't exchanging detailed information. Well, either way, I'd better get rid of Yoh as soon as possible.

After walking all night long, I finally reach the Nasu Flats train station just as the trains start running.

It only takes an hour to get back to Tokyo on the Limited Express. It's not enough time to rest, but I'm feeling too wound up for that to matter. Besides, I don't want to waste any time in thinking up a way to kill Yoh.

Using the cabin again would be too dangerous, and I'm not sure how I'd get her out there in the first place.

I just lost my temper and exploded in her face the other day. I doubt that she'll be as quick to trust me as Kouji was, which means that it'll be difficult to get her alone.

Rather than dwell on it by myself, I could just ask Saya for her opinion.

Even I have some pride, however. I want to show her that I'm a man who can take care of business.

Unfortunately, I'm unable to come up with anything before I get home.

Well, I suppose that I should just be proud of having dealt with Kouji, who was the imminent threat.

The search of Professor Ougai's cabin was a bust, with no trace of his having been there, but I see no reason to get frustrated. Saya isn't all that concerned about the professor's whereabouts, so looking for him is just something I'm doing to satisfy my own curiosity.

"I'm home."

It's morning, half a day later than I normally get home, and the sound of Saya running down the stairs tells me just how impatient she was for my return. It makes me feel all warm and tingly inside.

"Welcome home, Fuminori!"

She enthusiastically throws her arms around my neck, her smile at least twenty percent brighter than usual.

"Sorry I'm late. There was a change of plans....."

"It's okay. I'm just about done with my preparations too."

"Preparations?"

Saya responds to my confusion with a mischievous smile.

"I'm getting a surprise ready for you."

"......What kind of surprise?"

"That's a secret. Anyway, aren't you tired? Do you want to eat, or take a bath first?"

I don't realize how hungry I am until Saya mentions it.

When I think about how I've been walking around all night without eating anything, my stomach's emptiness becomes painfully clear. However, I can't sit down to a leisurely meal while covered in the dirt and sweat of the road.

"—I'd like to grab a quick snack and get in a long, hot bath first."

"I thought you'd say that, so I got the bath ready. You must be cold after being outside all night."

"Yeah, I sure am."

I'm amazed by Saya's foresight. She's always ready to give me what I want before I want it.

"Hmm, sounds like you had a hard time....."

While soaking in the bath together, I tell Saya about yesterday's adventure.

"Killing him was easier than I thought. The hard part was getting home."

The heat of the bath is soothing, as is the sensation of Saya leaning back against my chest as she massages the fatigue of the night's walking out of my stiff leg muscles.

Her cute little collarbone rises each time she squeezes my legs, and I can see the soft curves of her breasts floating in the water.

Ahh, I'm home, I think, as contentment fills my body. I don't even need to sleep to relieve my exhaustion.
Just like the living room and bedroom, the bathroom is painted in the colors that Saya and I find pleasing. We've left the entrance and hallway untouched, just in case someone should see inside the house, so these three rooms are the only places I can relax in my own home.
"It was very cold in the mountains, even for winter. I should've worn heavier clothing. I was afraid I'd freeze to death when it got dark."
"Why didn't you just take that Kouji person's clothes and wear them over what you had on?"
"Aren't you forgetting that I pushed him into a well? His clothes were with him at the bottom."
"Oh yeah."
Saya laughs and sticks her tongue out bashfully.
"—So now there's just that Tsukuba Yoh woman to worry about?"
"She's the only person I can think of who can connect me to Kouji's disappearance. After I take care of her, we can finally relax."
"Hmm....."
Saya glances at me over her shoulder like she knows something that I don't.
"Have you already thought of a way to kill her?"
"Well..... I've been thinking about it, but I haven't come up with anything yet. I was hoping that you might have some ideas."
"Leave it to me," she says, grinning with unusual confidence.
"I have a way of dealing with this that you'd never dream of. It's as good as done."
"R-really?"
"Okay, it should be about ready by now——" Saya says, her voice full of anticipation.
She rises from the bath, her naked body glistening through the steam.
"Come on, Fuminori. I have something to show you."
"Close your eyes, and don't open them until I say so. Okay?"
"Okay....."
I have no idea what's going on, but I do as Saya says and close my eyes. She takes my hand and leads me up the stairs. So this surprise she has for me must be up on the second floor..... As I wonder what it could be, the sound of something crying upstairs reaches my ears, putting me on guard instantly.

"S-Saya, is there something——"
"No peeking!" she admonishes me, then strokes my arm soothingly.
"Don't worry. It's nothing dangerous."
"A-alright....."
The voice gets louder and louder as Saya leads me up the stairs. The unmistakable sound of a person sobbing miserably is coming from the bedroom, telling me that Saya has let someone else into our home.
At first, I'm amazed that she can be so careless after what happened to her two days ago, but then I realize that something is strange.
I hear someone sobbing in misery?
Isn't Saya the only one whose voice can carry such clear emotion to me?
Although I still have my eyes closed when Saya leads me into the bedroom, I know that there is someone moaning and trembling right in front of me. However, I smell none of the human body odor that normally turns my stomach.
"Okay, time to meet face-to-face! Open your eyes, Fuminori."
I obey and open my eyes——and am struck dumb by what I see.
Tsukuba Yoh is lying on the floor in the fetal position, without a scrap of clothing to cover her shivering body.
When I first lay eyes upon her naked flesh, I am entranced by the sensuality of her generous proportions, far more mature than I would have expected from her usual pure and innocent appearance.
Wait, forget about that. Why is she in my bedroom, naked?
Moreover, why is she——
"Well, Fuminori? How does she look to you?"
".....She's beautiful, but why can I....."
It doesn't make sense.
There's no question that the naked woman in front of me is the Tsukuba Yoh whom I remember.
She isn't the putrid creature whose attentions I found so unbearable after the accident. My senses recognize her as the human that she is.
"This girl likes you, you know."
I do know. I've never told Saya, however.
How did she find out?
"So I decided to change her body into one that can be loved by you."
Saya pauses to gauge my reaction, then continues with a satisfied nod.
"I made her like me."
"What..... How?"
I still don't understand what led Saya to choose Yoh, but even more incomprehensible is what she just said.
She——changed Yoh's body?

"Don't you remember what I said the other day? I have the ability to mold the bodies of other living things."

Yeah, I remember. She said that she'd done something to my neighbor Suzumi's brain.
I hadn't doubted her sincerity, but I hadn't seen what she'd done to Suzumi with my own eyes either. I guess that, until now, I'd thought that she'd been half-exaggerating.
But now, with Yoh like this——

"It was a big change this time, not like the little tweak I made to the man next door. But, this is how my abilities are really meant to be used. This was my first time doing it, though."

"Is this..... really Yoh?"

It might be a strange question, considering that she looks exactly like Yoh, but I know better than anyone that she's not supposed to look like herself to me.

Yoh finally notices my presence and turns her head to face me.
I can see a faint glimmer of recognition in her glassy, unfocused eyes. It's the way Yoh used to look at me; how could I forget it?
This is far beyond mere cosmetic surgery. Once a twisted creature unrecognizable as human, Yoh is now the very image of human femininity.
There is no similarity between what she was and what she is ——— which means that Yoh has become something utterly inhuman.
According to Saya..... she has become what Saya is.

"No one on this planet knows more about the anatomy of Homo sapiens than I do," Saya declares, her voice filled with pride at her first creation. "I've studied a lot, after all."

"Studied? How did you learn this? Who taught you? When? Where?"

She couldn't have learned it from Professor Ougai. No teacher on Earth would be able to impart such knowledge or skill to Saya. This is far beyond human capabilities.

"Come on..... Don't you remember what you've been filling me with every night?"

Saya blushes in embarassment.

"That's like a blueprint for the human body. I can decipher it, and then I can bend it to my will."

"....."

What is she, really?
I've accepted that she isn't human, but there's more to her than that. Saya is something that far transcends my species.

"It was my first time, though, so it didn't go as well as it should."

When Saya approaches, Yoh trembles in terror and tries to crawl away, but she is only able to flail her arms and legs wildly. It's———like she doesn't know how to move her new body.

And the only sounds coming out of her mouth are frightened moans.

"———She can't talk?"

"Yeah," Saya sighs, shaking her head regretfully. "Unfortunately, her mind seems to have broken."

"It did take a whole twenty hours for the change to finish, after all. I feel a little bad for her. She must have suffered a lot."

"....."

Yoh looks up at me pleadingly, as though begging me to save her. She is no longer able to ask me for help, though, nor even to call my name.

"Well?" Saya asks, her eyes shining with anticipation. "Do you like her?"

I'm at a loss for how to respond.

"What do you mean.....?"

"You said you wanted family and friends, didn't you? That's why I got this present for you."

Her innocent explanation only confuses me further.

"A present.....? Come on, it's not like she's a puppy."

"There's not much difference. Her head is totally empty, after all."

I'm happy that Saya wants to please me, but she could use a little more common sense.

"It's not that..... Holding a person captive is probably a lot harder than you think."

"Don't worry about it. Look, I have her chained up."

The only thing preventing Yoh from being totally naked is the leather collar around her neck. I have no idea where Saya got it from, but it's the kind of dog collar that would be sold in any pet store, and attached to it is a chrome chain that's fastened to one of the bedposts.

Yoh tries to get away again, but Saya sends her sprawling with a tug of the chain.

Yoh falls clumsily to the floor, squealing in pain. Her actions are those of an unintelligent animal, just as Saya said.

"And besides, it's not like she can do anything complicated like escape and get help anymore. See? There's nothing for you to worry about, is there?"

——Saya has a point.

I was wracking my brain trying to come up with a plan to kill Tsukuba Yoh, but now my problem has been solved in a way that I'd never imagined.

If a normal person looks upon her now, they'll probably see no trace whatsoever of the old Yoh. And if she has no memories and can't even speak..... it's perfect. Saya has killed Yoh without taking her life.

There's still the problem of what Saya means by giving Yoh to me, however——

".....You're not happy?" Saya asks dejectedly, her confidence suddenly gone as though it was never there.

"Did I misunderstand again? Is this a problem for you?"

"No——"

"I can take good care of her all by myself. I won't let her make things difficult for you. So..... can she stay?"

That's not it. The last thing I want is to reject this symbol of Saya's affection.

But how can I explain to Saya the reason that I can't look at the naked woman writhing on the floor?

"It's not that....."

Yoh is the first human figure besides Saya that I've seen in the three months since the accident, and she's a woman — a woman positively glowing with voluptuous feminine beauty.

Of course I'm happy, but I also can't ignore the voice of reason that's telling me not to be.

"I'm happy, really, but..... If I show how pleased I am, I'm worried that you'll....."

"Eh?"

Saya looks puzzled, as though she has absolutely no idea what I'm getting at.

"I mean, look..... She's still a girl, right? Don't you..... balk at the thought of me living with another girl?"

After considering this briefly, Saya finally seems to understand what I'm trying to say.

"Ahaha, of course not! You're thinking too much!"

"....."

Maybe I'm worrying too much, although I'm pretty sure that I'm just showing the consideration that any man who's sworn his love to a woman would show.

Or maybe Saya doesn't understand that a man faced with a woman's naked body can't help but react regardless of his feelings.

"Aha, how funny! You really are kind, Fuminori."

".....Yeah?"

"I only did this so that she would be able to please you. If you like her and enjoy spending time with her, then I'll be happy too. You have nothing to be shy about."

"I hate to say this, but....."

I struggle to find the right words to express my true feelings.

"Men are, well——really depraved creatures, and..... I mean, Yoh's body has features that are totally different than yours, right? So——even though it's totally different from my love for you——I can't help but, um, get aroused——"

With each word that I squeeze from my lips, Saya seems more and more amused, until finally she starts shaking with laughter.

"I know, I know!" Saya exclaims jovially, patting my shoulder with one hand and wiping tears of mirth from her eyes with the other. "There's no reason to be ashamed of your natural male instincts, is there?"

"If you're really that worried, let me join in when you play with her. We can enjoy ourselves in ways that we couldn't when it was just the two of us. Okay?"

".....Are you sure?" I ask again, as though trying to force her to say no.

Saya answers me with a smile that I've never seen before. It is calm - so terribly calm - and there is something bewitching about the soft set of her lips that makes it wholly unlike her usual bright, childish smile.

"You and I are lovers, and Tsukuba Yoh is our pet. She will be reminded of that when we play with her - every day, from now on."

I finally know why Saya chose Yoh, for the venom in her voice and smile does not escape me.

Although she can no longer answer, if asked, Yoh would surely have chosen to be killed rather than to meet this end. I have no doubt that what she is experiencing now is a fate

worse than death - which is the very reason that Saya did this to her.

How wicked and terrible Saya is.

Perhaps others would fear and loathe her; to me, however, her malevolence is irresistably charming.

The horrifying cruelty of what she has done to Yoh is so very human.

Though her shape may be different, her soul is the same as ours.

When I look upon Yoh's wretched form, I see the intensity and passion of Saya's love for me - for the flames that have consumed Yoh are fueled by that very love.

I find myself enthusiastically accepting Saya's present.

"Saya, do you like this pet too?"

"Yeah. She's very pretty, and feels good to touch."

"So you'll be able to enjoy playing with her too, right? I don't have to hold back, do I?"

"Of course I will!"

Grinning happily, Saya grabs the chain and pulls Yoh to her feet.

"Ah....."

"Try touching her, Fuminori. She's really nice and soft."

"Okay."

As Yoh looks up at me with teary, pleading eyes, I approach and let my gaze roam freely over her lush body and ripe breasts.

I run my fingers through her hair, finding it as smooth as Saya's. Enjoying the feel, I continue to gently caress Yoh's head.

"....."

Her fearful expression softens a little. Perhaps she remembers me in some part of her mind, and still thinks that I am someone who will be kind to her ——— how foolish.

I stop stroking her hair and calmly seize both of her breasts.

"......!"

She flinches in pain at the sudden rough treatment, but I ignore her and continue to mercilessly knead her breasts as my lust demands.

They're really, really soft. When I squeeze them, it's like my fingers are being sucked inside.

I can't get this feeling from Saya's tight, slender body - and, besides, I would never think of treating her delicate frame so harshly. Yoh, however.....

I grab her full breasts from underneath and squeeze them like tubes of toothpaste, then give her nipples a little tweak. Yoh squeals, unable to handle the pain.

Even a little force can be painful when applied to a sensitive area.

Of course, I'm being more than "a little" forceful. I pinch her nipples between my thumbs and index fingers then twist hard, listening as Yoh's screams get louder and she gasps for air.

Having my way with a woman is——more fun than I thought.

"Fuminori," Saya says from the sidelines, "it looks like you're all ready to go."

She's right; my lust is already straining against my slacks, trying to burst free.

"Which do you prefer? A full-grown body like hers, or one like mine?"

"Hmm..... As far as bodies go, probably this one."

"That makes me a little jealous....." Saya complains, pouting adorably.

"You're the one who said you didn't mind. Come on, join in."

"Yeah, let me play with her!"

Saya presses up against Yoh's back and grabs her breasts from behind.

Following my lead, she wriggles her fingers against Yoh's breasts, taking full advantage of their softness.

"Aha, this never gets old!"

"Kuh.....uhhh....."

The tears in Yoh's eyes and the sight of her breasts changing shape under Saya's hands causes a new sadistic desire to well up within me.

"Alright, let's try this."

I pull off my slacks and put the tip of my hard manhood against Yoh's breasts, then begin sliding it into the space between them.

"Saya, bring them closer to the center."

"Okay, like this?"

Understanding what I want, Saya squeezes Yoh's breasts around my shaft. The sensation is astounding.

As Saya uses Yoh's breasts to press on me from the outside, I plow through the center with

my penis.

"Uhhhhhhh....."

"Does it feel good, Fuminori?"

"Yeah, it sure does....."

The softness and warmth of Yoh's breasts is different from that of Saya's vagina, a heretofore unknown pleasure that is swiftly driving me to climax.

I thrust even deeper, bringing the tip of my penis up against the crying Yoh's face.

With each stroke, the stiff head of my penis pokes her in the mouth or nose like a dark red weapon, bringing new cries of fear and pleas of mercy from her throat.

"Saya..... harder."

"Um, like this?"

"Aghh!"

Yoh jerks in agony as Saya squeezes her breasts ruthlessly.

Her convulsions combine with the sensation of Saya's hands coming through the softness of her breasts, and the feeling of being serviced by both of them at once brings my pleasure to the breaking point.

My lust erupts right in Yoh's face.

"Hii!?"

The sudden explosion covers her entire face with my hot seed.

Yoh shakes her head violently, trying in vain to escape from the sticky goo dripping from her eyelids and nose.

"Wow, that's a lot....." Saya says, staring at Yoh's face with a mixture of awe and envy.

Then Saya grabs Yoh's head, pulls it to her, and starts lapping my seed off of Yoh's face like it's the most wonderful thing in the world.

"All of this belongs to me....."

Even as Saya tries to lick it all off, some of it drips into Yoh's mouth,causing her to choke as it runs down her throat.

"Hey, stop that! You can't have any!"
Saya desperately presses her lips against Yoh's and thrusts her tongue into Yoh's mouth, sucking up all of the semen inside.
When she pulls away with a wet sound, a sensual strand of saliva and other fluids connects

them briefly.

"You don't get to have any," Saya says with satisfaction as she swallows my sperm. "It's aaaall mine."
Yoh looks on Saya's bewitching smile with fear-clouded eyes, as though she has no idea what's going on.

The sight of these two women passionately exchanging fluids fills my loins with hot lust once again.
Just using Yoh's breasts isn't enough. Saya went to the trouble of giving me this present, so I'd better take full advantage of it.

Abandoning Yoh's breasts, which are red and inflamed from the friction of Saya's fingers and my penis, I run my hand down her stomach and slide my fingers between her legs.

"Hya!"

As I touch her most sensitive place, her entire body stiffens as though hit with an electric shock. However, my fingers clearly feel the unmistakable honey seeping from her inner folds.
Despite what has been done to her, this woman is wet.
This realization purges my mind of any remaining respect for Tsukuba Yoh, replacing it with the affection one feels for a pet.

"Haha!"

Ignoring her cries of pain, I roughly push Yoh down to the floor and lift her left leg into the air.

"Auuuuuuuuu!"

I raise her leg until it's almost perpendicular to the floor, giving me a good view of her vagina.
Yoh probably can't feel shame anymore, but she does seem to understand how vulnerable she is in this position. She tries to get away from me, panting like a hunted animal.

While holding her firmly in place, I get on my knees and straddle her right thigh, then poke my manhood against the dripping entrance to her womb.

"Hiii!"

When I make contact with her sensitive mucous membrane, her gasps start to become screams.
She's still not wet enough to accept me without difficulty, but that doesn't matter. My shaft is more than hard enough to force its way in.
After enjoying Yoh's panicked reaction to the impending threat of pain, I thrust myself in to the hilt.

"Agwah!!"

She must not have been sufficiently prepared, as her choked scream is like that of a dying animal. In fact, it reminds me of how Suzumi screamed when I stabbed him with my knife.

"Uhhhhh! Ahhhhhhh!"

Yoh struggles to escape from the painful thing invading her.
But with me sitting on her right leg and holding her left leg in the air, she can't move her lower body at all. No matter how hard she flails her arms and twists her torso, she can't escape from me.

"Hau! Kuhhhh!"

Powerless to resist, she can only ride out each brutal thrust of my hips.

"Looks painful," Saya says, peering curiously at Yoh's tear-streaked face.

The sensation of Yoh's inner walls is completely different from Saya's.
Despite her immature appearance, Saya's vagina is surprisingly soft and flexible, always sucking me in like a hungry serpent. Yoh's, on the other hand, is clearly untouched. Unaccustomed to intrusion, it's still hard and tight, and isn't producing enough lubricant to match the speed of my thrusts. That said, such strong resistance can be a source of pleasure for the one exploring the undiscovered territory.

"Is she pleasing you?"
"You could say that."

Her vagina alone isn't as satisfying as Saya's, but the rest of her voluptuous body offers different riches to plunder.
The hypnotic quivering of her thighs as she trembles beneath me - the sight of her breasts heaving like storm-tossed ships - these sights and sensations alone are enough to stimulate my basest lusts.

"Hehe, I'll join in too."

Saya straddles the side of Yoh that isn't on the floor, pressing her clitoris against Yoh's hipbone.

"Ah....."

Saya gasps in pleasure as the tremors caused by my ravaging of Yoh's insides are transmitted into her body.

"How cute....." Saya mutters dreamily, rubbing Yoh's breasts with her left hand. "She's so adorable....."

"Uhhhhh.....uh.....uh.....uh....."

Yoh's moans start to become more rhythmical and passionate.
She must be beginning to find my movements pleasurable, as her insides are now wet enough for me to slide through easily.

"Hey——Fuminori——" Saya calls to me in a breathless voice as she pleasures herself on Yoh's body. "When you're about to come——"
She doesn't need to finish to make her desire clear to me.

"Yeah, I know. Don't worry....."

Saya shamelessly slides her slender waist between me and Yoh, the glistening dew dripping from her groin speaking to her readiness.

Racing to the finish, I pick up the pace of my thrusts. Once again, Yoh is forced to gasp for breath.

"Ahhhhhhhhh....."
"Saya, I'm——"
"Okay——Come, Fuminori——"

The blazing hot orgasmic fire races down my spine.

Having reached the moment of truth, I release my grip on Yoh and push her away, then seize Saya's buttocks with both hands.

"Fuminori——!"

Responding to her cry of anticipation, I pull her to me and drive my exploding penis into her soaking hot core.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

Saya accepts my raging manhood, screaming in both pain and ecstasy.
Surrounded by the familiar hot and soft embrace of Saya's body, I fill her with the seed of my lust that she so desperately desires.

"Haaaa.....hot....."

Saya convulses and collapses into my chest, smiling contentedly as she surrenders herself to the fire filling her womb.

Still breathing hard after my ravaging of her body, Yoh gazes at us with dazed, uncomprehending eyes.

Sprawled on top of each other, the three of us bask in the warm glow that comes in the quiet aftermath of a storm.

As I lie on my bed, completely drained of energy, I consider what my life will be like from now on.

Saya is sleeping in my arms; Yoh is sleeping curled up on the floor. Yesterday, I could not have imagined that the three of us would be a family.

A new home, new food, new family - all granted to me by Saya. To soothe my despair, she has selflessly led me from the brink of death to find new joy.

And I, too, have changed.

I have killed two people who were nuisances to me, and have made a third my mindless slave. Yet despite all that I have done, I am still able to sleep peacefully..... Without a doubt, I am no longer the Sakisaka Fuminori I once was.

How far will Saya go?

What will I become?

I feel somewhat unsure, though not discouraged, about the unknown world into which we are heading; and so, while playing with Saya's hair, I ask, "Saya——just what are you?"

I don't expect an answer. If Saya is asleep or doesn't want to respond, I won't mind.

Saya turns to me, however, and draws my gaze into the deep pools of her eyes.

"It's..... kind of hard to explain....."

She thinks for a while, as though searching for the right words, then says simply, "You know the dandelion flower? The one that scatters its seeds on the wind?"

"Yeah?"

"The wind carries those fluffy seeds far, far from where they were born. What if one of them ends up in a desert where not even a single blade of grass is growing? If you can imagine how that lone seed will feel..... then you might be able to understand me."

"....."

As I consider Saya's answer, she continues her story.

"The seed is a baby plant, after all. If it does its best, it can turn even a desert into a garden. Maybe that little seed will decide to try its hardest. Maybe it will decide to grow and multiply, so that it can turn the whole desert into a field of dandelions. What do you think can give that dandelion seed the strength to do so?"

".....What?"

Saya smiles softly and caresses my cheek.

"All it needs——is to be loved by just one person in the whole desert. All it needs is to be told how pretty dandelions are."

"....."

The loving touch of her slender fingers fills me with peace and joy.

"I..... love you."

I pull her into my chest, nodding silently.

"Stay with me forever. Never leave my side."

"Of course."

Basking in the soft warmth of our love for each other, we sink into the oblivion of sleep.

He has been buried alive.

His whole world is the silence and cold of the grave.

Ever since his voice gave out and he lost the strength to scream, no coherent thought has run through Kouji's mind.

Perhaps his brain was being merciful by shutting down. By forgetting who he is and why he is trapped in this dark well, he is able to ignore the freezing cold that is gradually draining his life.

Instead, he dreams.

Images flash before his eyes. Random, unconnected scenes from his twenty-odd years of life. Not all are of happy times; there are sad, painful memories as well, but even these are merciful, for they are pleasantly warm compared to the death that is encroaching upon him.

He dreams of mountains.

His older brother had taken him hunting for insects when he was a child. They'd sealed the butterflies that wouldn't fit in their cage in a plastic bag, and later found the bag filled with the wings of suffocated butterflies——

He dreams of his lover.

They'd met at a mixer, where he'd been the only one to realize that she couldn't hold her liquor. After she'd had too much to drink, he'd looked after her while she vomited in the back alley. They'd toasted each other with canned juice, and then——

He dreams that he is diving into the black depths of the night sea.

When he reaches the bottom, he looks up to see the moon shining through the surface of the water. As he gazes up at the circle of light, entranced by its roundness and brilliance, he listens absently to the distant sound of a car——

Something still conscious within him tells him that this dream is wrong.

Have I ever gone diving..... in the ocean..... at night before?

The dots begin to connect in his mind, forming a barrier to separate his dreams from reality.

What is bothering him.....? Of course, the car. He can hear the sound of an engine coming from far away.....

The engine noise gradually changes to a low idling, then abruptly gives way to silence —— followed by the sound of a door opening and closing.

It sounds like..... someone drove up and got out of a car. This isn't a dream. These sounds are real——

Understanding comes like a sudden blow.

This isn't the bottom of the sea, and that circle of light isn't the moon.

It's——the mouth of the well. The sun has already risen, and someone is right outside with a car.....

The last piece of the puzzle falls into place, and he becomes Tonoh Kouji once more.

"Help me!" Kouji shouts, surprised by how easily his voice emerges. Perhaps he is desperate enough to subconsciously block out the pain of his raw throat.

"Hey! I'm down here in the well! Help me!!"

He keeps screaming with all of his might. Soon, the echoes in the cramped well become deafening, and he is no longer sure if his screams have meaning or if he is just howling wordlessly.

Nevertheless, he continues. His only desire is to be heard, so that whoever is out there will know that he is dying at the bottom of this well.

Kouji's wait is not long, but it feels like an eternity when spent at the boundary of hope and despair.

Soon, the circle of light above him is partially eclipsed by the silhouette of a person staring down into the well.

"Tonoh-kun? Are you alive?"

It's a woman. Although her voice is not familiar, Kouji has heard it somewhere before - for some reason, however, he can't remember who it belongs to.

"Just hold on. I'll get you out of there."

The silhouette vanishes, restoring the light to a perfect circle. Fear of being left alone again threatens to send Kouji into a panic, but his reason has recovered enough for him to resist the urge. ——*She said she's going to get me out,* he reminds himself. *I haven't been abandoned.*

While waiting, he gingerly tests out his body, which he had forgotten all about until now.

His joints ache, and his fingers and toes are numb, but nothing is completely immovable. Though exhausted, he's definitely still in one piece.

After some time, the silhouette reappears at the top of the well.

"Are you hurt? Can you climb a rope on your own?"

"No, I don't think so....."

Kouji lacks the confidence to attempt such a feat with his fingers barely moving.

"Hmm..... Oh well. I'm coming down!"

After a brief pause, the owner of the voice tosses a knotted climbing rope into the well.

He grabs the rope as soon as it reaches him, its definite presence filling him with true relief. Finally free from his despair, he is able to start asking questions - specifically, who is his savior?

The rope shakes as the woman climbs carefully down the ladder, the beam from the floodlight slung over her shoulder pushing back the shadow cast by her body.

She is soon standing in the same mud as Kouji, and he finds himself face to face with——

"D-Doctor!?"

"Were you expecting someone else?"

Kouji couldn't have imagined that his savior would turn out to be Dr. Tanbo Ryouko, neurosurgeon at the Tokyo University Medical Center.

Instead of a white gown and tight skirt, she's wearing a heavy leather coat, denim jeans, and boots with no heel. Her practical clothes make it clear that she expected to end up hiking through the mountains.

She's carrying not a flashlight, but an all-purpose lamp that can be toggled between a large electric floodlight and smaller side-mounted flourescent lights. It's obviously survival gear, rather than the sort of thing you'd find in an emergency kit.

"......You look awful," Dr. Tanbo says wryly as she looks Kouji up and down. "Here, drink this."

She pulls a flask out of her pocket and hands it to him.

"Don't chug it. Go slow, taking small sips. It should help a little."

"T-thank you."

Walking around with a flask is like something a middle-aged alcoholic man would do.....

Maybe Kouji's just old-fashioned, but he can't help but think that it's not the sort of item that a

young female doctor should be carrying.

Nevertheless, he unscrews the cap and takes a swig — and struggles to keep from coughing as the potent liquid sears his tongue.

"W-what is this!?"

"Spirytus vodka. It's good as an analeptic or disinfectant, and also does a fine job of setting certain things on fire."

Her straightforward, no-nonsense tone makes it clear that she's quite serious. Kouji can only gape at the doctor, the dark smile on her face doing little to ease his confusion.

Is she..... really Dr. Tanbo Ryouko?

There's no trace of the bookish, mild-mannered doctor Kouji met at the hospital. Her expression is now set in a hard mask, and her eyes are sharp and wary.....

In the darkness at the bottom of the well, it is possible - however unlikely - that the change in her features is caused by the ominous shadows cast by her lamp. It's not so easy, however, to explain the change in her demeanor.

"Um..... Why are you here?"

"You're the one who called me, aren't you?" Ryouko replies brusquely, glaring at Kouji like she would at a student who'd just said something foolish.

"I get a strange message from someone who's off looking for a missing person, but neither he nor his friend answers when I try to call back. Am I supposed to think everything's fine?"

"N-no....."

Although Kouji still doesn't understand why she acted so quickly, it's a different part of what she just said that seizes his attention.

"——Wait, what about Tsukuba!? You called Tsukuba Yoh too?"

"I did, but she didn't pick up either. To be honest, I figured you were both corpses already."

"....."

That's right, he was almost killed - and at the hands of the man whom he'd believed was his best friend all along.

Anger and frustration well up inside him. He can't forgive Fuminori's betrayal, nor can he forgive himself for his foolishness.

And now he has no idea if Tsukuba Yoh is safe. Fuminori tried to kill Kouji; could he have done the same to——

"Calm down, why don't you?" Ryouko says irritably, without even looking at him. "Getting all pissed off here won't solve anything."

Still engrossed in her examination of the walls, Ryouko laughs scornfully at the idea.

"If you thought something was wrong," Kouji says to her back, "then you must have called the police, right?"

"The police?"

"——So you still think this mess can be cleaned up like that, do you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Starting to get annoyed by her overbearing attitude, Kouji is about to demand answers when she cuts him off with a gesture and shines her light at a corner of the well.

"You didn't notice this, Tonoh-kun?"

"Huh?"

——In the light of the lamp, Kouji sees that some of the stones are clearly different than the rest of the wall. This must be what Ryouko was looking for while ignoring him.

"......Huh? .....No, there wasn't enough light to see."

"Hmm....."

Ryouko's gaze moves slowly along the wall, finally coming to rest on a gap between two of the stones. The hole is just wide enough for an adult to reach into open-handed.

"You sure picked the right well to fall down," Ryouko says with a grim smile. "Like they say, expect the unexpected."

She wastes no time in thrusting her hand into the opening.

After she feels around for a few seconds, Kouji hears the thunk of something solid coming together behind the wall.

"......Doctor?"

Ryouko pulls her hand out and gives the different-colored stones a gentle push. With the rumble of weights shifting, the stones slide smoothly back into the wall.

"——So that's how he fooled me. I had no idea this was here the last time I came."

"You've..... been here before?"

Kouji wants answers, but Ryouko ignores him and peers into the opening. In the beam of her floodlight, Kouji can see a concrete tunnel leading into the mountain.

"I'm going on ahead, Tonoh-kun. You'd better stay here." Her warning is simple and utterly devoid of warmth.

Considering his options, Kouji looks from the tunnel to the rope and back again.

He's practically sweating now, thanks to the nearly 200 proof vodka he just drank, but although feeling has returned to his fingers, he still doesn't have the strength to climb the rope.

That said, the mere thought of being left alone again in the well makes him shiver.

"I'll go too. Please take me with you."

"......Heh, have it your way."

Ryouko steps into the tunnel without looking back, and Kouji doesn't hesitate to follow her.

"You were pretty different the last time we met," Kouji says sarcastically, following Ryouko as she moves cautiously down the tunnel with her light leading the way.

"This isn't the hospital, and you're not my patient. This service doesn't come with a smile."

"So this is who you really are?"

"I wonder. Does it matter?"

Ryouko suddenly stops and stares at the floor. When Kouji looks over her shoulder, he sees a dust-covered rope lying coiled up in the middle of the path.

"......What is it?"

"Something left behind by the last guy who came down that well."

Ryouko picks up the rope, examines it, and hands it to Kouji.

"It's about twice as long as my rope. It has a knot in it, and both ends have been severed. They were connected before, making it a circle."

"......Huh?"

"You loop one end of the circle around something topside, then use the rest to climb down into the well. When you're at the bottom, you cut the circle open and pull the whole rope in with you——leaving behind no trace of your descent."

Ryouko shines her light down the tunnel, revealing that it ends in a closed wooden door about ten meters ahead.

"That's how he avoided detection after hiding here. He really got me good."

"Doctor, you said you've been here before....."
"Yeah, you and Sakisaka-kun aren't the only ones," Ryouko says dryly. "I checked out Ougai's cabin a while back."

"If there aren't any other exits..... then he's still behind that door."

At first, Kouji thinks that she is holding a steel pipe. Amazed that she would be carrying a weapon, Kouji looks closer — and is appalled when he realizes what it really is.

It's a gun.

And not one of those sleek handguns that he's seen in the movies, but a double-barreled shotgun. The stock and most of the barrels have been sawed off for easier concealment, making it appear even more terrifyingly brutal.

"Wha——what is that!?"

"A 12-gauge shotgun," Ryouko replies blandly, as though naming a brand of cigarettes.

"I don't have a permit for it, and cutting it down like this is also illegal. Any other questions?"

"......What are you planning to do with that?"

Ryouko looks over her shoulder and shows Kouji her most chilling smile yet.

"When I first learned what Ougai was doing, I was a model citizen. I'd never even gotten a ticket."

The woman whom Kouji had thought was just a normal doctor waves her sawed-off shotgun menacingly as she continues, her tone sharp, yet self-deprecating.

"If I'd had this back then, I probably would've been able to kill Ougai then and there. If I had, you kids might not have been dragged into this disaster. I feel bad about that, really."

"....."

Kouji listens in silence, helpless to do anything but watch as understanding moves farther and farther out of his grasp.

"In other words, everything I do from now on is to clean up this mess that you and your friends have stepped into. Remember that, and don't ask any unnecessary questions. Got it?"

Kouji's only choice is to nod weakly in response.

With the light in her left hand and the shotgun in her right, Ryouko walks up to the door and takes a deep breath.

Then she kicks the door open, putting her full weight behind the blow.

With a disappointingly feeble sound, the door breaks off of its hinges and falls into the room.

In the beam of Ryouko's light, dust billows into the air like white smoke.

The room is large, probably at least thirty-five square meters in size. Kouji's first impression is of an operating theater that was turned into a storage room.

The tiled floor is set with drainage grates, and there's no mistaking the movable operating table sitting in the middle of the room. One of the walls is covered with cabinets containing enamelware and drugs, while against the opposite wall stand a writing desk and bookshelves.

Even Kouji can recognize that much. The mysterious objects cluttering the tables and shelves, however, are beyond his comprehension.

Mirrors delicately engraved with complex patterns, grotesque statues and masks that must have been left behind by a race of savages, tapestries woven in nauseating arrays of color, a crystal ball the size of an infant's head.....

They're probably all antiques, but there's one thing that they definitely have in common - every one of them is so loathesome and foul that Kouji feels sick just looking at it.

It's as though they were designed for the sole sinister purpose of immortalizing their creators' hatred of the world.

Rare-looking books of the sort that were in Ougai's Tokyo home are piled here and there, and on one of the shelves are stacked some scrolls that look to be made of some kind of sheepskin or papyrus - whatever it is, it's not paper.

Finally, there are the indecipherable chalk patterns and symbols filling every available space on the walls. Even the two sliding blackboards are completely covered in strange, unreadable scribblings. Just looking at them is making Kouji dizzy——

"Don't look!" Ryouko snaps at him.

"Listen. Don't move, and whatever you do, don't touch anything. Even if something draws your attention, don't look at it. If you see something that feels wrong, stare at your shoes right away. Got it?"

"Y-yeah....."

Ryouko switches from the floodlight to the flourescent lamp, then sets the light on a nearby table where it can illuminate the whole room. She then holsters her shotgun, only to pull out an even more confusing set of tools —— a digital camera and a can of spraypaint.

She gives the spraycan in her left hand a good shake, switches the camera in her right hand on, and steps into the room while looking at the camera's side-mounted screen.

After methodically recording the symbols on the walls and blackboards, she immediately begins to cover them in layers of black spraypaint.

"Um, Doctor.....?"

"Lesson one. Never look at strange designs or read anything written in unusual languages like Latin. Use a camera to record them for later examination, then use paint or something to destroy the real thing."

Now that she mentions it, Kouji realizes that she's only looking at the screen of her camera - and even then only in short glimpses - and never directly at any of the drawings.

He understands what she's saying, but it still doesn't make any sense.

"Why do you have to....."

"Now that you've come this far, you'd better shut up and listen for your own good. Things like crystal balls and mirrors are dangerous. Anything can happen if you break them, so it's best to cover them with a cloth or paint over them for the time being."

Kouji begins to fear that this doctor might be even crazier than Fuminori.

Despite the burst of energy he received from the vodka, Kouji is still exhausted from having spent the night at the bottom of a well.

The fear is affecting his body, making him dizzy and nauseous.

Soon, the walls are covered in black paint and the stale air is thick with the smell of turpentine.

".....That should do it for now," Ryouko says with relief, then tosses the empty can aside and puts away her video camera.

"What happened to Ougai?" Kouji asks, supporting himself against a nearby table.

"Hm? Oh, he was over there."

Without stopping her examination of the papers on the writing table, Ryouko nonchalantly points to a Chinese-style screen standing in one corner of the room.

He was there..... Her clinical choice of tense makes the truth clearer than any words can.

"....."

The urge to see for himself is irresistable. Kouji staggers across the room to the screen, taking the utmost care not to look at the scaly octopus-thing that is painted on it.

Behind the screen is a large easy chair. Although he's never met the man before, Kouji is fairly sure that the person sitting in it is Ougai Masahiko.

Ougai's corpse must have shrunk significantly while drying in this sealed, undiscovered chamber. The skeleton is barely the size of a child's, with only the business suit hanging from the bones offering any hint of Ougai's former stature.

His empty eye sockets and wide-open jaw are filled with darkness - the same darkness that surrounded Kouji at the bottom of the well.

Compared to those gaping voids, the tiny hole in Ougai's right temple is almost demure.

The small revolver he must have used to kill himself is still clenched in his dangling right hand. Next to Ryouko's shotgun, it would probably look like a child's toy.

Ryouko must have noticed Ougai's corpse when she was spraying paint on the walls.

Having gotten beyond surprise by now, Kouji is instead impressed by Ryouko's ability to keep working next to a corpse without batting an eyelash. He wonders why he keeps meeting people who are totally crazy.

If it weren't for her, Kouji reminds himself with a bitter smirk, he would have ended up joining this mummified corpse here - and no one would ever have found him.

Kouji's vision suddenly dims.

He's pushed himself too hard, and the Spirytus vodka can't help him anymore.

He collapses to the floor, unable to hang on to his slipping consciousness, and the last thing he sees are Ougai Masahiko's gaping eye sockets staring at him.

When he awakens, Kouji finds himself lying on something dry and soft.

A bed is a bed, he thinks to himself, even one that smells of mold and dust, and especially after having slept in cold mud all night.

There are no lights hanging from the ceiling, but the soft, warm light of a lamp fills the room.

A room devoid of furnishings —— Kouji realizes that he's in Ougai's cabin, in the ground-floor bedroom that he'd searched before getting pushed into the well.

You're awake?

When Kouji turns his head to face the voice, he sees Ryouko sitting in a chair against the wall, expressionlessly studying the pile of documents on the table in front of her. She must have brought them up from Ougai's underground lab.

As she examines the papers by the light of the lamp, she occasionally takes bites of the sandwich she has in her free hand.

"If you feel up to eating, there's food there."

Without looking up from the files, she gestures towards the convenience store bag sitting on the nightstand.

"How did I..... get here?"

Kouji can't imagine that a woman - even one like Ryouko - could have climbed out of the well with him on her back.

"There was a sealed door behind one of the bookshelves down there," Ryouko mutters, as though talking to herself.

Taking care not to let her explanation interfere with her reading or eating, she continues, "It was a pain to break open, but it led to the boiler room underneath the cabin. The other side had been hidden with a thin layer of mortar. He probably sealed it after bringing all his equipment into the secret lab, then used the well to get in and out. Pretty thorough."

".....Was there really something in there that he needed to hide so badly?"

"There used to be. This is the last of it."

Having finished her sandwich, Ryouko picks up some unsorted papers with her free hand and waves them in the air.

"Not all scholars want to get on stage at a symposium and show off their research to the world, you know. There're also nutcases who get their kicks by learning secrets no one else knows, and by being buried with those secrets in hidden tombs that no one'll ever find."

Kouji still hasn't the slightest idea what Ougai's secret might have been. From what Ryouko said in that tunnel, however, he can guess that whatever it is has done something to Fuminori.

"Fuminori..... What happened to him?" Kouji asks desperately, no longer caring who he gets answers from.

"What does Fuminori have to do with that dead body down there? Just what is it that you're after?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Ryouko replies coldly, as though Kouji's concerns are none of hers.

"Sakisaka-kun told me that he'd been asked to find Ougai by one of Ougai's relatives."

".....Yes, he told me the same thing."

"Oh? Well, at least that's consistent."

Ryouko pulls several sheets of looseleaf paper from a different file.

"The truth is that Ougai had no relatives. I thought that Sakisaka-kun was simply lying. However——there was another possibility I should have considered. He might have been tricked by someone claiming to be Ougai's family."

Ryouko pauses, then looks sidelong at Kouji.

"Does the name 'Saya' ring a bell?"

"Saya? .....No, who is that?"

"Who - or what - is the question..... but the more I read, the less I understand."

She sighs bitterly, then returns her attention to the papers in her hand.

"All I can say for sure is that it appears to have been the focus of Ougai's research. If Sakisaka-kun has become deeply involved with whatever Saya is, then he's already passed the point of no return."

The icy certainty in Ryouko's voice sends a chill down Kouji's spine.

"If so..... what will you do with him?"

He has to ask, even though he already knows the answer.

"It's like I said," Ryouko replies, smirking at the tension in Kouji's voice. "I have no idea how many times I've wished I'd had a gun with me one year ago. ——I won't make the same mistake twice."

"If I go to the police, everything will be over!"

Ryouko doesn't respond, as though she didn't even hear what Kouji just said.

"Fuminori tried to kill me," Kouji continues persistently. "If I press charges, he'll be arrested and——"

Ryouko cuts him off harshly. "You have witnesses? Proof? What motive did Sakisaka-kun have to kill you?"

"You know, Tonoh-kun, you're completely misunderstanding what police do. Their job isn't to fight for justice, nor even to keep the people safe."

"W-what are you saying?"

"Finding reasonable explanations for unreasonable events——that's what police are for. They will always choose to believe the simplest, most logical explanation. It's just like how water always flows downhill. They aren't interested in the truth. They don't know, or care, that the truth is often stranger than fiction."

".....Surely they're not all like that! I won't know until I try!"

"Exactly," Ryouko states, as she pulls another sandwich out of the bag. "That's the problem."

She hasn't spared Kouji a second glance since looking at him earlier. Even while talking, her

attention is always focused on the papers in front of her.

"Let's say you accuse your friend of going crazy and pushing you into a well. Then the police will come up with two more potential 'truths.' Like you're trying to frame your friend with a fake suicide attempt. Or perhaps, more simply, that you fell into the well by accident and are now deliriously accusing your friend. In addition to your statement, the police will consider two alternative versions of the truth. Maybe you're making it all up to frame your friend.Or - even simpler - the shock of having fallen into a well by accident has you doubting your friend.

These three possibilities will race to see which comes out with the most convincing evidence. No one knows which will be winner. Are you willing to bet everything you have on your 'truth'?"

"....."

Kouji has no response.

Can he really logically explain the events that led Fuminori to do what he did? How can he convince everyone else when he doesn't even understand it himself?

"And here's the biggest problem....." Ryouko says calmly, cutting into Kouji's thoughts.

"While you're raising hell with the police, we'll lose our chance to corner Sakisaka Fuminori. If he sees trouble coming, he'll go into hiding to avoid getting caught. And then we'll be back to square one."

She pauses to take a bite of her sandwich before continuing.

"Just like how I let Ougai get away."

"....."

A heavy silence falls upon them, with only the soft rustle of pages turning in Ryouko's hands marking the passage of time.

"Please tell me, Doctor——" Kouji says, his hushed voice breaking through the quiet.

"What is so unforgivable that you're willing to take justice into your own hands? Just what exactly did Ougai do in that room down there?"

Once again, Ryouko coldly ignores Kouji's question. This time, however, Kouji doesn't back down. He keeps staring at her relentlessly as she continues to silently immerse herself in the documents.

After some time, Ryouko rearranges the papers in her hands and sets them aside, as though having come to some conclusion. She then finally turns her whole body towards Kouji.

"——Listen, Tonoh-kun."

Now that she's finally facing him, Ryouko affixes Kouji with a firm stare that belies the calmness of her voice.

"You should back out of this now. Go relax at an onsen somewhere in Nasu or Nikkou, and don't return to Tokyo until you're ready to forget all of this."

"Forget.....?"

After disbelievingly repeating Ryouko's command, Kouji feels quiet, yet irrepressible anger rising within him.

"Oumi was my girlfriend, and Fuminori was my best friend. You're telling me to forget about them?"

"Yeah, forget about them," Ryouko replies, coolly rebuffing Kouji's anger. "This isn't a suggestion. It's a warning."

"Whatever their relationship to you might have been, that's all over now. You'll never see them again - I guarantee it."

"Then what about Tsukuba!?" Kouji practically shouts.

"What'll happen to her? She was begging me for help on the phone! Something terrible was happening to her somewhere!"

"And how many hours ago was that?"

"......!"

"Do you know how much time has passed since I saved you? How much longer do you think you would've lasted down there if I hadn't?"

She shakes her head, then coldly says, "It's too late. She's already dead. You shouldn't expect everyone to be as lucky as you."

"You....." Kouji growls, unable to supress his anger.

"......If you'd found me dead in that well, you wouldn't have thought anything of it, would you?"

"I was prepared for that, of course," Ryouko says with a shrug, unfazed by Kouji's ire. "I hardly expected to find you alive."

"....."

Once again, Kouji has been made painfully aware of the futility of arguing with this woman.

No matter how hard he tries, he'll never be able to make her feel shame or reform her ways. It's meaningless to debate with someone whose morals are fundamentally different.

Kouji gets out of bed and stands on his shaky legs.

"......How long have I been asleep?"

"About half a day. I envy your ability to recover from exhaustion so quickly. It's the privilege of the young, so enjoy it while it lasts."

Kouji looks at his watch and sees that it's 4 A.M., which means that it was already early evening when Ryouko rescued him. He can't believe that he survived sitting in that well for almost two days.

Now that the gaps in his memory have been filled in and his sense of time has returned, he realizes that it's already Sunday morning. Ryouko's right - a lot of time has passed since he spoke to Yoh on Saturday.

Kouji grabs a sports drink and two jellied nutritional snacks from the pack of food that Ryouko brought, then heads for the door. He's still unsteady on his feet, but he can manage through force of will.

"Just to make sure, mind telling me where you're going?"

"Tokyo," Kouji replies brusquely, his tone no less hard than Ryouko's.
"Tsukuba might still be alive. I'm going to save her."

"......You just don't listen, do you?"

"I could say the same to you."

Kouji is expecting Ryouko to watch him go with that cold, mocking smile of hers; instead, however, she sighs heavily and rests her jaw in her hands.

"Can't you wait a little longer? Somewhere in here—" she thrusts her chin at the mountain of papers in front of her, "—is the answer to what this thing Ougai called 'Saya' is. I think that we should wait until I figure that out and come up with a plan to defeat it."

"You would think that, since you're already convinced that Tsukuba is dead."
In truth, Kouji is extremely uneasy about going on alone.
He knows, however, that, even if he did have Ryouko's help, she would surely bring about the worst possible end. He mustn't depend on her.

"Tonoh-kun," Ryouko calls, just as Kouji opens the door and steps into the hallway.

"You were almost killed once. Don't let it happen again."
She picks up something that was lying next to her pile of documents and casually tosses it to Kouji.
When Kouji catches it, he feels its solid weight fill his hand.

"This is——"
Kouji stares at the menacing shape of cold metal.
It's a revolver, the one that was clenched in Ougai's skeletal fist.

"It has four more shots. There's no safety, so you just need to pull the trigger to fire.
.....Where and how to use it is up to you."

"....."
If Kouji were his usual cautious self, he probably wouldn't hesitate to reject the dangerous offering.
The only end a gun can decisively bring is absolute ruin. He doesn't intend to go back to Tokyo to fight a losing war.
However——without even knowing it, Kouji has already set foot into Ryouko's world.
Choosing instinct over reason, he accepts the small but deadly weapon and stuffs it into his pocket.

There is no question that Kouji intends to save Yoh and bring Fuminori to answer for his sins.
In the back of his mind, however, he clearly hears the footsteps of destruction approaching.

When he steps out of the cabin's front door, Kouji shivers at the cold of the dawn forest.
The freezing wind sweeping across the front yard is like knives against his skin. He can't believe that the outside air is even colder than the mud at the bottom of the well.
The cold of night must have been lessened by the stagnant air filling the cramped space. If he'd been exposed to this intense chill all night long, he would surely have frozen to death.
Kouji finds two cars parked at the end of the road leading to the front yard. The mini-car next to his Accord must be Ryouko's.

When he sits behind the wheel of his car, he gets some relief from the feeling that he has taken the first step, however small, back into his world.
He takes small sips of the sports drink, wetting his parched throat, then washes down some jello. His stomach rebels at the sudden influx of food after 36 hours of emptiness, but he

manages to force down the urge to vomit.
Kouji needs the energy. No matter how hard it is, he must regain enough stamina to overcome the challenges ahead.

After forcing down the necessary amount of food, Kouji leans back in his seat and takes a short break. Now that he has begun to feel like himself again, he reaches into the back seat and pulls his spare cell phone out of his bag.
He never expected that accidentally carrying two phones would be such a stroke of luck.

As he calls up Fuminori's number and prepares to hit send, Kouji is overcome by a flood of emotions.
Rage, despair, sorrow, pity - he is unable to decide what to feel towards his friend.
However, there is no time for such idle worries. Every second lost diminishes the chance of saving Oumi and Yoh..... Kouji refuses to even consider that it may already be too late.

He steels himself and presses the button, then holds the phone to his ear as it rings longer and louder than ever before.
Right now, Fuminori's phone must be displaying the name of the caller. Kouji wonders what Fuminori's reaction will be when he sees it.

"....."

The call goes through.
Kouji can clearly sense surprise, apprehension, and dark fury coming from the silence at the other end of the phone.
Feeling slightly gratified, Kouji delivers the first jab.
"Yo. What, you weren't expecting a call from a dead man?"
".....What a surprise. How did you manage it?"

As Kouji is about to answer, an idea suddenly flashes through his mind.
"There was a secret passage in the well," Kouji says, as a plan forms rapidly in his head. "It led to a hidden underground room."
He pauses to let that sink in, then, with the satisfaction of having taken the initiative filling his voice, says, "I met Ougai Masahiko, you know."
"....."
Fuminori's gasp makes it clear that Kouji has seized the advantage completely. Keeping his voice fearless, he decides to further exaggerate the truth.
"I know it all - everything about 'Saya'. You're finished, Fuminori. I've got all the proof I need to blow this thing wide open. You won't even see it coming."
"You bastard....."

It's obvious from the sound of Fuminori's voice that rage has overwhelmed his reason. Kouji's hit-or-miss bluff appears to have worked perfectly.

His victory is tainted, however, as Fuminori's extreme response to the word 'Saya' brings a cry of pain from the traces of friendship still hiding in the depths of his soul.

"If Sakisaka-kun has become deeply involved with whatever Saya is——"

Ryouko's cold words play back in his head, sounding even more pitiless than before.

"——then he's already passed the point of no return."

——He musn't allow himself to be overwhelmed by useless emotions.
"Fuminori, where are Oumi and Tsukuba?"

Kouji suddenly switches topics, trying to keep Fuminori off balance. It all comes down to this.

"Even I might be willing to show you mercy. Depending on how you act, that is."
"......?"
"If you swear not to cause any more suffering, I'll forget about what you did to me, and about what I found at the cabin.
I don't want to have anything more to do with you and Saya anyway. All I want is for Oumi and Yoh to be safe."

"Oumi and Yoh, huh....."

Fuminori's voice trails off, but it's obvious that he's desperately trying to decide whether or not he can trust Kouji's words, and whether or not there's room for negotiation. Fuminori has been called out, and now it's time for him to show his hand.

"I truly don't know anything about Oumi. She never came to my house. Yoh, however——"
Fuminori pauses, then gives a knowing chuckle that sends chills up Kouji's spine.

"Well..... I wonder if she'll really want to leave."

"......She's with you, isn't she?"

Kouji is relieved to learn Yoh's location and that she is, at least, alive.

At the same time, however, it is now clear that Fuminori had something to do with the suffering that Kouji had heard Yoh going through over the phone.

Had Yoh already fallen into Fuminori's trap back then?
What has happened to her? How is she being treated?

"She's finally had her deepest desire granted, you know, " Fuminori says with venomous sarcasm. "She's my property now. It looks like you and Oumi got what you wanted after all."

Kouji feels despair settling over his soul.

How much lower will this man go? Kouji wonders. Must Fuminori seek out and destroy every memory of the friendship that they'd once shared?

"Let Tsukuba go. When I'm sure she's safe, I'll destroy everything I have on you and Saya."
"How can I trust you? First, I want you to——"
"I'm not giving you a choice here, Fuminori."

Kouji instinctively realizes that it's dangerous to push his bluff any further.

"I'll call you again later. You have until then to make up your mind."

He hangs up without waiting for a response.
Fuminori doesn't know that Kouji is still at the cabin in Tochigi. Right now, he's probably worrying about whether Kouji will show up in an hour or a minute. Kouji hopes that he'll be able to take advantage of Fuminori's confusion.
——Three hours. That's how long it'll take to race all the way back to Tokyo.

Kouji is afraid that his body won't allow him to maintain the concentration necessary for such a long drive.
His mind is clear, but his limbs still feel half-asleep, like they're weighted down with lead.

Although he knows that he has to stay resolute, Kouji still longs for the life that he had until a few days ago.

Back then, life-or-death conflicts were the furthest thing from his mind, and he'd never imagined that he might be fighting for someone's life. With each passing moment, he feels himself becoming less like the person he was.

When all of this is over, will he be able to return to his normal life?
Or will this change continue until it has consumed him and his world?

Time is against him. Every second that passes is wasted.
Even so, he decides to allow himself just five minutes of weakness.

For exactly five minutes, he leans against the steering wheel and cries.

And when his tears have run dry and his heart is calm, Kouji starts up his Accord and drives away.

I stare at the silent phone for a while.
There is anger, of course, but something cold and heavy holds my emotions in check.
The sense of danger..... To be honest, I'm surprised at how calmly I'm handling this.

"Mas——ter?"
Yoh looks up apprehensively from where she was attending to my manhood throughout the call.
Perhaps mistaking my silence for annoyance, she desperately rubs her breasts against my shaft and attacks the head of my penis with her tongue.
The remaining fragments of her memory seem to have joined together, as she has regained some degree of speech. Upon realizing this last night, Saya immediately began to teach her language once more, finding it amusing to teach her pet new tricks.
"Don't——be mad——Yoh will——try harder——"
Still gazing up at me pleadingly, Yoh sucks on my penis without even taking the time to breathe.
Her ministrations threaten to fill my head with a white fog of pleasure that would impede my thoughts - and, besides, my arousal has already vanished.
At first, I consider making her stop. When I gaze into her puppy-dog eyes, however, I begin to think differently.

Thanks to Saya's efforts, I have a family once again. For the first time, I am becoming aware of the responsibility that places on me.
I am now the head of a new Sakisaka household, as well as its only male member. It is my duty to protect, to comfort, and to ensure the happiness of the women living under my roof.
With that in mind, I know that I mustn't carelessly show any fear or confusion.
"Continue, Yoh."
"Yes——"
I entrust my manhood to Yoh's ripe breasts, basking in the pleasure with one part of my mind while contemplating our current predicament with the other.
It is clear that I made a grave, irredeemable error when I failed to finish Kouji off two days ago. Right now, I need to set my frustration and anger aside and deal with this problem logically.

It's time to leave.
I have no way of knowing when Kouji escaped from the well, how much he has learned, or how many people he has had contact with since then.
Now that it's impossible to know how far the problem has spread, simply disposing of Kouji again won't guarantee our safety.
Right now, Kouji is like poison in a reservoir. No matter what, it will never be possible to filter all of the poison out of the water. What should one do in this situation?
The answer is obvious - stop drinking the water. The only choice is to find a new place to drink and start a new life.

"Fuminori? Who were you talking to?"
Saya returns from the kitchen, where she'd gone in search of a midnight snack. She's munching on her favorite - spareribs.
Purging myself of unease and impatience, I respond with a casual shrug.

"It looks like we have a little trouble. That bastard Kouji is still alive."
"Oh dear."
By breaking the news suddenly, and without any trace of anxiety, I am able to avoid frightening Saya or putting her on edge. Instead, she goes straight to being surprised.

"Saya..... It might be best if we leave this house."
"Hmm, I see....."
Saya lowers her eyes and strokes her chin thoughtfully.
Despite the severity of the situation - of which Saya is no doubt fully aware - she has gone straight to the planning stage without wasting time getting upset. I knew that remaining calm would work.
Moreover, I'm currently getting my penis sucked by Yoh. It would be hard for anyone to get too serious under these circumstances.
"Well, either way, this area would have gotten dangerous once people realized that Suzumi-san's family has disappeared. I think this day would have come sooner or later."
".....Yeah," Saya nods. I can tell that she's reluctant to leave, but at least there is no sadness in her expression.

Everything will be fine.
In this way, I will continue to protect my life with Saya. I have that power.
Knowing that we've overcome one problem gives me new confidence.

"By the way, Saya, I'm——almost——"

"Eh? Ah! Wait, wait!"
Saya hastily discards her spareribs and pushes the still-sucking Yoh off of me.
"Au.....!"
"Fuminori! You're harder from Yoh's breasts than you are when you're with me!"
"Well, that's....."
Despite her scolding tone, Saya gently and passionately wraps her mouth around my manhood.
"*Lick*.....*kiss*.....*huffle*"
With my orgasm already charged up by Yoh, Saya's ravenous tongue and throat push me over the edge instantly.
"Saya, I'm——"
".....Come on, give me——"
Before Saya finishes, I thrust deep into her throat and unleash my lust as I stare into her eyes, wide with surprise.
"*Gulp*.....*gulp*....."
Even while moaning around my penis, Saya grabs me firmly by the waist and swallows all of my seed without choking.
".....Pwah! That was good."
"You're so greedy, Saya," I say, smiling wryly as I look at Yoh, who's lying limply on the floor.
"You always keep it all for yourself."
"Of course. I won't forgive you if you give it to any other women."
After baring her teeth at me grumpily, she burrows her face into my stomach.
".....I'm serious, okay?"
It's adorable how Saya goes from angry to pleading like this. I find myself reaching down to muss up her hair.
"Don't worry. I won't. .....Now then, we'd better get ready."
"Okay."
We can travel light, and borrow the Suzumi family car.

I'd better withdraw everything that's left in my bank account and carry it as cash. I'll also need a weapon, something more reliable than a butcher's knife.
Kouji will most likely follow. He still thinks that Yoh can be saved, after all. However, I'm not abandoning this house just to run away.
Now that Kouji knows our location, staying in one place will put us on the defensive. I'm not about to do something so foolish. I need to find a way to regain the initiative and deal with Kouji at a place of my own choosing.

The next time we meet, I'll kill him with my own hands. I'll make sure to wring every last drop of life out of his body.
A shiver runs through me as I anticipate the battle ahead, and my bloodlust feels like orgasmic fire filling my loins.

When she looks up, the morning sun is already streaming in through the window.
Tired from hours of poring over files, Ryouko removes her glasses and massages her aching eyes.

Her dreams are always filled with horror, yet the night she just spent was more nightmarish than them all - and it's not over yet. She has only just set foot on the threshold.

As expected, the files left behind by Ougai Masahiko were not the sort that Ryouko could simply pick up and read.
Fortunately, Ougai had been too old-fashioned to put his trust in electronic media. If he'd encrypted his files on a computer, she'd have had to find a hacker to decipher them.
Apparently, however, Ougai had not wanted to take the time necessary to write every sentence in code. The method he had chosen was, in fact, quite simple.

Of the vast number of files Ryouko had found in his underground lab, the majority turned out to be notes and theses from Ougai's days as a student. The important papers were the diaries and research notes that had been scattered throughout the piles and piles of worthless scrap.
At first, she was unable to understand the documents that she had found. Each sheet was covered with text on one side and blank on the other; each line was completely unrelated to the next, making it impossible to glean any meaning from the paper as a whole.
The trick revealed itself, however, while she was sorting the pages that made no sense. She found that each line continued on the same line of a different page.

In Ougai's diary, for example, the first day would begin at the first line, then continue not with the next line, but with the first line on the next page.
Similarly, the second day was the second line, the third day was the third line..... and so on and so forth. After filling all the lines on one set of pages, Ougai had torn them out and hidden them by scattering them among his other files.
There was no regularity to how the pages were numbered, of course. There was probably a random number list somewhere, but, unable to find it, Ryouko had no choice but to figure out the page order manually.

Despite knowing that the task would be exhausting, Ryouko set to it valiantly. After separating all of the looseleaf sheets from the jumbled files, she began the painstaking process of linking pages together according to the contents of their first line.
Ougai had apparently dismantled and scattered his diary after finishing a number of days equal to the lines on one page, and had done the same to his research reports every thirty pages or so.
The diary was much easier to restore. Because the entries varied in length, later pages had a larger number of blank lines. The page with only one line, therefore, was the last page of the diary, and those with the most blank spaces could be considered closer to the end.

Ryouko's perseverance has paid off, for she has already succeeded in restoring several volumes of Ougai's diary.

As she rereads them, she feels despair draining her spirit, as it has so many times before.

This cursed feeling of powerlessness that comes with knowing hidden truths - those who have tasted it once shall be beaten down by it again and again, until the day they die.
All secrets are connected, after all. Once you have glimpsed even the tiniest fraction of the world's true horrifying face, you have no choice but to watch in terror as the veil continues to roll back inch by inch.
All that is left is to wait for the day when insanity will crush your reason under its ever-increasing weight.

——I have succeeded in communicating with the organism. It shows enormous curiosity, and its intelligence is beyond doubt. See separate files for confirmed voice patterns and body language.

——"His" appetite for knowledge is insatiable, and his learning efficiency is off the charts. However, he exhibits absolutely no desire to be recognized as an individual.
His ego appears to be quite weak. His psyche is clearly different from a human's.

——His ability to learn languages is astounding. No, perhaps I should say... "ability to develop communication." When I laughed at his mispronunciations, he immediately picked up the concept of "puns."
Ever since, he has been employing his entire vocabulary in an attempt to find puns that will "make me laugh." Perhaps, in a few days' time, he will have learned enough language for us to communicate freely.

——We have begun to discuss various matters using human language. Although he continuously barrages me with questions, he is unable to answer any of mine.
Judging by his responses, it appears that he only gained awareness after materializing in this universe. He has no knowledge of where he came from.
While I am disappointed, the fact that he has reached this level of intelligence only one week after starting to think tells me that there is no end to what I can learn from him.

Hypothesis: He is not a naturally-occurring organism, but was created by an even more sophisticated sentient lifeform - like an artificial intelligence, perhaps.
If this is true, it would explain why he has no ego, yet possesses such a hunger for knowledge. He might be some sort of reconnaissance "robot" that was sent from another world.

For the nth time since she started reading, Ryouko smiles humorlessly.
How wonderful it would be if she were ignorant enough to laugh the diary off as the delusions of a madman or the work of a science-fiction writer.

Unfortunately, however, she knows far too much.
When she thinks back to the many horrors that Ougai brought into her life, the words before her take on chilling credibility.

——I have confirmed that his intellect far surpasses any human's.
This morning, I taught him about prime numbers. After I explained the Lucas-Lehmer test for Mersenne primes, he immediately began to list examples that he had calculated in his head. I was only able to confirm by memory up to number 10, M89, but he continued to list further examples without any trouble.
I left him to his calculations, and, when I returned a few hours later, I discovered that he had

written down more than 70 of them.
Computers all over the world are currently working to calculate Mersenne primes, but the last one I remember being found was number 39 back in 2001.

When I entered several of his results into my laptop and ran the Lucas-Lehmer test on them, I found that every one was correct. The rest are no doubt just as accurate.
After all, he has never shown the pathological need for respect that would lead him to tell such a lie. I see no reason to doubt his veracity.
If I could reveal to the world my process for discovering these Mersenne primes, the prize money alone would make me a billionaire..... It goes without saying, however, that keeping my research secret is far more important than some worthless money.
His computational abilities exceed even those of computers. I can only conclude that his cognitive power is beyond anything humanity can imagine.

——At his request, we have begun a new field of study.
Despite his immeasurable aptitude for mathematics, he now desires to concentrate on sociology and the natural sciences. Perhaps our math problems are simply too boring for him.
He has shown especially keen interest in how organisms reproduce and multiply. As he possesses nothing that could be called emotion, I hesitate to use this description, but..... when he learned about DNA, he seemed somehow "excited."

In fact, even he seemed surprised by his reaction. Unable to understand his own impulse, he decided to label it "instinct." If this description is in his own words, then this development is extremely interesting.
It would mean that there is a deeper level to his psyche than just the knowledge he has acquired since coming to this world. If I can use this discovery to trace his roots, I might be able to learn what he truly is.
Note: Candidates for the plane and world of his origin are discussed in Regarding the Silver Key, filed separately.

——I spent the whole day carrying books into his room.
Apparently, he is no longer satisfied by the knowledge I am able to impart. It should come as no surprise, considering his linguistic prowess, but the speed at which he consumes texts is astounding.

The diary continues for some time, chronicling the intimate relationship between Ougai and "him."
In the back of her mind, Ryouko imagines the old professor climbing down the well in the middle of the night to hold congress with some inhuman creature in that bizarre laboratory.
The image is disturbingly similar to the nightmares that have plagued Ryouko's dreams and shattered the silence of many nights with her screams.
What follows, however——makes her worst nightmares pale in comparison.

——He has made a very strange request. This is the first time he has wanted anything other than food and reading materials.
I can hardly believe it, but——he wants to consume the sperm of living creatures. This is separate from his desire for food. Once again, he is describing this impulse as "instinctive."
Now that he has declared himself a "lifeform that needs the sperm of males," he has begun to consider himself "female." Starting tomorrow, I suppose I will have to start calling the organism a "she."

——Is the personality that she is exhibiting really just an imitation created for her amusement?
Ever since she started to immerse herself in human culture and literature, she has been acting surprisingly human. She recognizes herself as female, and already possesses an enormous amount of knowledge. Is she trying to create a human identity for herself based on these?

I have seen her laugh, grow angry..... and today, she——cried.

Is she just copying our emotional displays? If not, then she is already.....

Is the "soul" something that any intelligent lifeform can acquire?

I feel that I am witnessing something even more mysterious than the secret of life.

——Today is her birthday. Although it is a year late, I want to give her a heartfelt gift.

"Saya" was the name of my mother's cat. In my childhood, she was her sole friend and my beloved. I decided long ago that, if I were ever to be blessed with children, I would give that name to my daughter.

Happy birthday, Saya.

Let this be the name of your soul. You have earned it.

——The "ability" that Saya has discovered in herself is showing more extraordinary results each day.

I have no doubt that she is a kind of artist. What exactly is it that she created in her body from the rat semen I gave her?

At this point, I can only surmise that it is a type of retrovirus - a reverse transcriptase enzyme that creates exactly what she desires.

The rats - or rather, the creatures that were once rats - that have been transformed by her "art" are so very beautiful.

The many enzymes secreted by her body and the various appendages she uses are discussed in detail in my biological observations, filed separately. Here, I will say this: By witnessing Saya perform her operations on several rats, I have gained much confidence in my theory that her body is designed specifically to manipulate the biology of other organisms.

Ryouko looks grimly at the still-unsorted mountain of research reports. When she finally manages to separate those papers, she will probably find the many other files mentioned in the diary.

Ougai's biological observations —— at the very least, she wants to look through those before facing the thing called "Saya." Under no circumstances does she want to go into battle unprepared.

She looks at her watch and sees that it's 7 A.M. Assuming Tonoh Kouji drove without making any stops, he should be arriving in Tokyo about now.

Now that it's too late, she wishes that she'd stopped that stubborn young man from leaving——even if she'd had to shoot him in the leg.

Kouji pulls up two blocks away from the Sakisaka house and stares at the silent building.

In the bright light of morning, the Sakisaka house seems to be shrouded in a dark miasma, like a black hole torn out of the landscape - is it just a figment of Kouji's imagination?

Every window is closed, offering no glimpse of the inside. Kouji has no way of knowing whether or not Fuminori is home.

A pedestrian - probably a neighbor - walks his dog down the street, glancing back at Kouji after he passes by the Accord.

Kouji isn't surprised that he'd draw attention even though he's sitting inside his car. He hasn't bathed or changed clothes since spending the night in the mud at the bottom of a well, so he must look like some homeless drifter.

When he looks in the rearview mirror, he sees the haggard face of a man with one foot in the grave staring back at him. It's hard to believe that the unshaven, tired face really belongs to him.

If he stays here for too long, he might very well be reported to the police. He'd better pull himself together and get moving.

After driving slowly up to the front of Fuminori's house, Kouji quickly checks to make sure no one is around, then gets out of the car.

Anyone who might be in the house probably heard the sound of the car, but there's no point in worrying about that now.

Kouji walks swiftly through the gate and yard to the front door. He puts his hand on the doorknob, forgoing ringing the doorbell or knocking. The time for such pleasantries has passed.

The knob turns smoothly, offering no resistance. It isn't locked.

The door is unlocked, and the knob turns easily in his hand.

He puts his ear against the door and listens for any sounds coming from inside the house. *It's like I'm a thief,* he thinks, feeling some shame.

——There doesn't seem to be anything moving inside. After checking the street again to make sure that no one's looking, he quickly opens the door and disappears inside.

A strange stink immediately assaults his nostrils. He is already prepared for anything, however, so, rather than discourage him, the stench only sharpens his caution to a razor's edge.

He has crossed this threshold many times in the past, and has countless vivid memories of times spent at this house.

So why —— why does he feel the same ominous, blood-chilling aura that he did at Ougai's home and cabin?

Anger and sorrow seize Kouji's heart, as though the image of a dead friend has been defiled.

Kouji doesn't remove his shoes before entering. He knows why he's here, after all.

Every rain shutter is closed, filling the house with gloom, and he can see nothing but pitch black darkness through the open doors of the various rooms.

I should have brought my flashlight from the car, he thinks ruefully, then remembers that he

dropped the light when he was attacked by Fuminori outside of the well. It's still lying in the backyard of the cabin in Tochigi.

The house might be empty - then again, it might not be.

Each particle of the air seems charged with silent menace, like knives against his throat.

Is there an enemy lurking in the thick darkness that fills every room of the house? It's not hard to imagine Fuminori waiting for a chance to take him by surprise and finish what the well failed to.

Kouji walks down the first floor hallway, then climbs the stairs to the second floor and checks that hallway too. He moves slowly and carefully, keeping his senses sharp, but feels nothing sneaking up behind him or watching him from the shadows.

After completing his rounds safely, he is convinced that the house is empty.

He suddenly realizes that his right hand is touching the cold steel of the gun in his pocket. Did he intend to draw the weapon upon encountering Fuminori?

Now that Kouji thinks about it, his own actions seem mysterious to him.

What is he planning to do when he meets Fuminori? Will he lay into him with curses and epithets? Will he force him to turn himself in? Or will he——

Enough, Kouji decides. This isn't the time for these thoughts.

If he keeps thinking about it, he'll stop moving; if he stops moving, the crushing fear will paralyze him forever.

Right now, he has to forget about such hopeless questions and keep marching ahead. He has to close the distance to his prey.

In any case, Fuminori isn't at home. What form their reunion takes will probably be decided at the moment of their meeting. All Kouji has to do is not hesitate.

Still, why does the whole house smell like stagnant water?

It's been three months since Fuminori shut his friends out of his affairs..... Just what kind of life has he been leading all this time?

Kouji enters the living room and feels along the wall for the light switch. The moment he flips it on, the answer to his question is revealed.

".....Wha!"

How far has Fuminori gone?

Kouji realizes that this is the first time he has encountered Fuminori's insanity in visible form.

From the dust piled in the corners of the room, it is clear that the paint was not applied recently.

How many nights has Fuminori spent surrounded by this maddening array of color?

Why, if such obvious signs were available —— why didn't Kouji realize that something was wrong before it got this bad?

Was he deaf to the dying screams of Fuminori's sanity as it crumbled away? Was their friendship really so worthless?

As he stands petrified in the unfamiliar living room, Kouji directs his anger entirely at his own powerlessness. If he could, he would like nothing more than to apologize to the old Fuminori for not helping him in his lonely battle against his suffering.

Kouji feels that he might have been able to save Fuminori. Perhaps he is arrogant to think so - but, if so, it is arrogance born of kindness.

Kouji passes through the living room and opens the sliding door that leads to the kitchen.

When he enters, he finds that the most disturbing of the many stenches that have been torturing him is at its strongest here.

Blood.....The room is redolent with the smell of countless layers of blood grown stale over time.

He peers into the well-used sink.

Around the rim, he sees faint, brownish-red blotches that water alone couldn't rinse off.

Even more unmistakable are the stains on the dishrag.

Such stains are proof that many dishes were washed here, over and over again - but what could the cloth have been used to wipe off to make it that color?

Kouji stares at the refrigerator next to the counter as though it were something unbelievably terrifying.

He stands motionless until he is able to work up the courage simply to touch it.

Then he steels himself, grabs the thick handle, and opens the door. First he'll check the freezer, then the refrigerator.

The large freezer is packed with frozen meat of varying shapes and sizes. As each piece is wrapped tightly in frosted-over plastic, he can't tell what kind of meat it is.

The meat in the refrigerator however, has already been thawed for consumption.

For a while, he can only stare in disbelief at the five fingers beckoning to him from the back of the compartment.
They are the long, slender fingers of a woman, their bluish tinge giving them the appearance of waxworks.
Kouji is unable to remember what Oumi's hands looked like, even though he kissed her fingers countless times.

When he finished crying after his conversation with Fuminori, Kouji promised himself that he wouldn't cry again - and, in fact, he doesn't.
He regrets his decision, however. He indulged himself too early.
He should have saved his soothing tears for this moment..... for he is now absolutely certain that the world that he knew has vanished forever. Now, at last, his doubts about Fuminori have been utterly obliterated.

Kouji pulls Ougai's revolver out of his pocket and wraps his hands around its grip like he would a charm.
Its definite presence - its promise of merciful, absolute destruction - is the only thing keeping his sanity intact.

He will surely use it to kill Sakisaka Fuminori.
Not for revenge——

Not for justice——
But to reassure himself that this world is indeed governed by his reason. For that purpose alone, he must eliminate the anomaly.

He breathes deep, exhales, then lifts his hand before his face and stares at his spread fingers.
Alright, he's not shaking. He is prepared to face his new objective.
Kouji sticks the revolver back into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone.

Branch

He calls Fuminori.
He calls Ryouko.

He calls Fuminori.:
It's time to finish this.

Just as he promised earlier, Kouji calls Fuminori again.

The call goes through immediately, as though Fuminori was waiting for it.

"......Hey, Kouji. Where are you?"
"What difference does it make?"

As soon as Kouji responds, the shrill sound of a phone ringing fills the house. Startled, Kouji spins around and looks into the hallway.
Fuminori's house phone is ringing and flashing to signal an incoming call.

"......Hmm, I see. I figured you'd be at my house."

Kouji fell for it. Fuminori is the one calling the house phone.
He probably used a different cell phone to call his own house while talking to Kouji, knowing that, if he could hear the phone ringing on the other end, he could pin down Kouji's location.
Fuminori must have predicted that the first thing Kouji would do would be to break into his house, and, upon finding it empty, immediately call him.

"So, I guess you've already seen everything....."
"Yeah——" Kouji responds fearlessly, even as he feels horrified by the cunning and foresight that Fuminori has begun to show.

"It looks like you've become quite the meat-eater since we last met. ——Just how many people have you killed?"
"Actually, I've only killed one so far," Fuminori replies unapologetically, with perfect cheerfulness.

"I've taken apart three or four, though. I've gotten pretty good at cutting the tendons and draining the blood and such."

Kouji no longer feels sadness or horror when faced with Fuminori's inhumanity. There is only the cold desire to kill the creature speaking such revolting words with his friend's voice.

"You killed Oumi, didn't you? You were lying when you said you hadn't seen her."
"Hmm, I wonder....." Fuminori mutters, seeming somehow embarassed.

"To be honest, the one I ate first might have been Oumi. It was the same day she disappeared, after all. Well, the body wasn't in any shape that I could identify anyway."

Kouji already abandoned hope, of course, but this is the first time that he has learned of his

lover's brutal end.

".....Tsukuba too?"
"No," Fuminori says with an exasperated chuckle. "She's here, like I promised. I'm no fool. I need her to trade with you, right? I won't waste her."

"Let me hear her voice."
"I don't think that's possible. She's in no shape to talk, after all."

Fuminori's dismissive words further sharpen Kouji's bloodlust.

"You forget what I said? If you don't let her go unharmed——"
"Come on, be happy that she's still alive. Or, would you rather have Yoh as a corpse?"
"....."
"Let's get this straight, Kouji. You bring your evidence along with all the files you've gathered. When I'm satisfied that they're the real thing, I'll hand Yoh over."

"——Fine."

Even to Kouji, it's obvious that this deal is a sham.

In all likelihood, Fuminori is planning to kill his friend and bury his secrets forever. Moreover, Kouji doubts that Yoh is even alive. Her meat could very well be somewhere in the refrigerator right in front of him.
However, Kouji isn't particularly interested in Fuminori's true intentions; after all, he has no intention of making a trade either. His only goal is to get close enough to destroy Fuminori and whatever is pulling his strings.

"Where?"
"You remember Professor Ougai's house? The one you followed me to? Let's meet there tonight at seven. Come alone."
"Hey.....!"

Fuminori hangs up without waiting for Kouji's response.

Perhaps..... perhaps Fuminori, too, has sensed his opponent's intent. If so, then he has realized that Kouji is not coming simply to be killed by him, but with the purpose of killing him as well.

So, we're two duelists trying to gauge each other's moves, Kouji thinks to himself, smiling grimly as he pockets his phone.
Right now, it's as though Kouji and Fuminori are holding out their hands for the other to shake while hiding knives behind their backs. It's astounding how much their friendship has changed.

The question is whether or not to comply with the 7 P.M. rendezvous agreement. If this were a serious negotiation, it would be wise to avoid preempting Fuminori in any way that could provoke his anger. What Kouji and Fuminori are really doing, however, is trying to lure each other into a trap where he can be hunted and killed.

Kouji doesn't know what Fuminori plans to do between now and 7 P.M., but he's not about to let his enemy keep the initiative.
The fierce bloodlust that has taken root in his heart is more than enough to energize his exhausted body.

Kouji leaves the death-filled house, his stride more determined than before.

Branch End

calls Ryouko:
The ringing of her cell phone interrupts Ryouko's labors.
When she sees that the caller is Tonoh Kouji, she unwittingly breathes a sigh of relief.
"This is Tanbo. What is it?"
"I've searched Fuminori's house."
Even over the phone, Ryouko can clearly hear the change in Kouji's tone. His is the dull, flat voice of someone who has had all the energy beaten out of him.
"Fuminori has——murdered people. He's killed too many people to count, and he's..... eating them."
"....."
Despite being an amateur, Kouji has already come face-to-face with something particularly horrible.
In consideration of the shock he must have received, Ryouko decides to not say anything.
"Oumi, and probably Tsukuba, are already dead. Doctor..... I was wrong."
"The fact that you're still alive to make this call means that you haven't made a fatal mistake yet," Ryouko says, praising Kouji in her own way. Whether or not he is comforted is a different matter.
"Anyway, don't screw up this time. Do nothing until I return. What you're dealing with here——isn't going to go down easily." With her understanding of Saya deepening by the hour, Ryouko is able to make this declaration with new confidence.
"Fuminori already knows that I'm alive. I didn't tell him who rescued me, but he's definitely on guard."
"I see——"
Kouji's actions were rash, but there's no point in regretting them now. The more proactive approach would be to figure out a way to use the pressure that Kouji must have placed on Fuminori.
Besides, the fact that Ryouko's involvement is still secret makes her a wild card. Depending on how she plays it, this advantage could be decisive.
"Have you found anything, Doctor?"
"Not enough yet," Ryouko answers, glancing sidelong at the looseleaf pages still scattered across the table.
"Let's see..... I'll wrap this up by evening and return to Tokyo around midnight. You refrain from making any more trouble until then. Got it?"
".....Yes."
The glazed-over quality of Kouji's voice is actually reassuring to Ryouko.
She knows that he won't try to have everything his own way anymore. His is the voice of someone who has become a machine, able to do whatever it takes to accomplish a single goal.
Kouji has decided to eliminate Sakisaka Fuminori, and, in order to complete that objective, he is even willing to accept the help of Ryouko, whose principles hardly mesh with his. A praiseworthy change, indeed.
After Ryouko hangs up, she gloomily counts the stacks of looseleaf that still need to be restored.
There's no time left. She'll probably only be able to get the general picture.
If she has to go into battle with only fragmentary knowledge, then there's one thing that she absolutely must decipher..... Ougai's biological reports, which should contain information on the strengths and weaknesses of the organism called "Saya."
All she can do now is pray for luck as she delves back into the mountains of paper.
Branch End

Branch Convergence

Driving was such a dangerous proposition for me that I hadn't gotten behind the wheel of a car since my accident last summer.

I can't see the roads as roads or the cars as cars, after all. Until it became necessary this morning, I'd completely given up on the idea of driving on public roads.

Now that I've had three months to get used to my condition, however, I can tell what the things I see are, such as which are cars and which are pedestrians.

Even though I can't see the red and green of the traffic lights, I can figure out what they mean, and I've learned how to tell when someone's turn signals or brake lights are flashing.

I still can't read the street signs, of course. Nevertheless, I managed to make it safely to our destination with Saya and Yoh in the back seat.

After we decided to abandon our home, Saya was the one who came up with the idea for our new hideout. When she'd been living in Professor Ougai's house, she'd discovered an abandoned building on one of her late-night strolls.

In these hilly suburban residential areas that are still under development, it's not unusual to find thick, nearly untouched forests just off the beaten path. Saya's old "playground" is located in one such secluded area, unaffected by the flow of everyday life.

It used to be a privately operated sanatorium hidden among the silent trees. After the owners went bankrupt, it remained unsold and was eventually forgotten.

After I left Saya and Yoh at the hideout, I returned to town to make some preparations. Now I'm finally back at our new refuge.

I liked this ruin from the moment I first laid eyes on it. Mountains of construction materials and other large trash litter the modest front yard, forming a serviceable barricade. This place looks even less likely to receive unwanted attention than our house.

Since all humans appear as revolting monsters to me, places they've been tend to stink or seem covered in filthy slime. Empty ruins like these, utterly devoid of traces of human life, are the places I find the most restful.

"I'm back," I call out, letting them know that I'm not a stranger, then I go down into the basement where they're hiding.

"Welcome back. Were you okay with the car?"

"It was no problem at all. I've figured out how to tell which roads are one way. As long as I keep my speed down, there's nothing to worry about. So, how are things here?"

"I took a look around. As I thought, there's no sign that anyone's been here since then. This place is safe."

"I see. I hope it stays that way."

I'm a little worried that this abandoned building could become a hangout for biker gangs or homeless people.

"It's probably because of all the trash piled in front. Most people won't get anywhere near that, don't you think?"

"Hmm....."

It doesn't bother me at all - I rather like it, in fact. Well, I suppose that normal people wouldn't.

"So, how was your shopping? Did you find something good?"

"I sure did."

I proudly unwrap the weapon I just bought from a camping goods store - a one meter long wood-chopping axe. I chose the biggest, sturdiest one I could find.

"Knives with blades longer than fifteen centimeters are illegal, the sign said, but they were selling these right next to it. Pretty silly."

I grip the axe with both hands, feeling its dependable weight, and swing it like a baseball bat. With deadly force, the steel blade sweeps through the air right where a person's neck would

be.
Yoh, lying huddled on the floor, flinches in terror at the howl of the axe as it slices the air.
"How sharp is it? Want to test it on Yoh?"
"No, that'd be a little....."
I definitely wasn't expecting Saya to say anything so brutal.
"You don't need to worry. Yoh's new body can heal pretty easily from cuts and such."
"Even so, I'm sure it'll hurt."
"Oh..... Yeah, I guess you're right," Saya replies, as though it had completely slipped her mind.
"But....." she continues, smiling bashfully at the oblivious Yoh. "Her voice when she's in pain is pretty adorable, you know?"
"Well..... I just wouldn't feel right cutting a human with an axe."
"Really? Then, what about Kouji-san?"
"That's simple——"
It should be obvious, but I guess that Saya still doesn't understand.
"——I don't see him as human, so I'll have no trouble chopping him up or crushing him to a pulp."
"Hmm, that really makes a difference?"
"Yeah. Humans have a conscience, after all. No matter how much you hate someone, you can't help but think twice about killing them. And that's how I'll win."
".....Really?"
Saya seems awfully subdued. I guess she's concerned about what'll happen when I have it out with Kouji.
"He's bigger and stronger, so I might not have much chance of beating him in a straight-up fight. But, what's just 'slaying a monster' to me is 'murder' to him. This is big. He'll definitely hesitate at the last moment."
"I'm..... a little worried, you know," Saya says softly, staring at the floor with unusual gravity.
"With that kind of psychological warfare, nothing is certain....."
She raises her head and looks straight at me.
"Hey, don't you think it'd be better if I hunt him?"
I appreciate Saya's consideration. Even though it could be interpreted as her having no faith in me, she's still putting my safety above hers.
Nevertheless, I can't accept her heartfelt suggestion.
"With your strength, you might be able to overpower a girl like Yoh, but I think it'd be hard for you to take down a guy."
The bitter memory of Saya being raped by Suzumi is still fresh in my mind. Saya falls silent for a moment, seeming to understand what I'm thinking, but then comes right back to stubbornly press her case.
"My first surprise attack against that man went fine, though. Most humans go limp as soon as they see me, you know. It was the same in the hospital. You were the only one who was able to talk to me."
"Hmm..... Well, I guess you have a point."
I can't imagine it, personally, but I suppose it's possible that Saya's appearance is shocking enough to make someone lose their morale.
Suzumi was able to gain the advantage because he had the same condition as me, which let him see Saya as a cute girl.
Fear doesn't necessarily make people weaker, however. Depending on the situation, it can even send someone into a berserk rage and make them harder to put down.
In other words, such a tactic would be the same "uncertain psychological warfare" that Saya's worried about.

"Alright, Saya, how about this——"
When I tell Saya the new plan that just popped into my head, her gloomy expression instantly becomes a bright smile.
"That's perfect! You're so smart, Fuminori!"
"Not really....."
It's not really a great plan, but I guess the fact that it lessens the risk for me is enough to excite her. She's so easy to please - but that's cute too.
"So, when's Kouji-san coming?"
"I don't know. He'll call sooner or later, and then I'll lure him here and finish him."
Kouji will definitely come. I know that he won't leave Saya and me alone.
We could just keep running, now that we've started, but I want to eliminate Kouji as soon as possible.
Therefore, when he contacts me, I intend to meet with him unless it's an obvious trap.
"I got a call from him this morning. For now, I've sent him to an unrelated place. I'm thinking I should shake him up a little."
"It'd be best to take care of him after it's dark, don't you think?"
"Yeah. When the time is right, I'll lure him here and finish him. No one will notice anything if we do it here."
"We're finally going to get another human's meat, but it's just going to rot here. There's no refrigerator."
"Why don't we use it to trap other animals? It could be bait for stray cats or crows——"
"That's too dangerous. If they somehow get away with the meat, someone might find it and make a lot of trouble."
"I see. That's true."
Humans are extremely dangerous, and their filthy, stinking bodies make me sick just by being nearby..... Ironically, however, nothing tastes better than their meat. I truly regret having to leave behind everything in our refrigerator.
"Well, there're a lot of animals living in the forest around here. I don't think we'll have any trouble finding food."
"We have three mouths to feed, you know. Are you sure?"
"Leave it to me. I may not look it, but I'm good at hunting. I'll be sure to get lots for us."
"Okay, looks like you're going to be the breadwinner of this family."
Saya giggles happily at my praise. I find these childish qualities of hers adorable.
"I wonder how long we'll be able to relax this time."
Because of the casual way she says it, I almost miss the emptiness to which her question leads.
"How long..... I wonder."
Saya's right.
This..... won't last forever.
No matter how safe this hideout might seem, we will have to abandon it eventually. Just like when I failed to silence Kouji, the slightest mistake could put our life together in jeopardy.
Some dumb kids might decide that this old ruin is a good place to test their courage, or this land might be targeted for new development.
In order to be together with Saya, I have chosen to live differently than other people. We will probably never be able to find peace in this world teeming with humans——not unless we somehow escape from it.
"——I think it'll be a long journey."
I pull Saya into my arms and fold my hands around her slender shoulders, then whisper, "But, life is like a journey anyway. Nothing stays the same forever. The only question is whether you watch time pass you by or are swept up in its flow."

"I guess you're right."
Saya smiles softly, perhaps in resignation, perhaps in sadness - either way, there is peace and contentment in her expression.
"We'll be together, though..... so I'm not lonely. You're not either, are you?"
"No."
I have no regrets.
As long as I can hold Saya in my arms——I will gladly pay any price.
"And besides," she adds brightly, as though trying to cheer me up.
"I know that, one day, we'll be able to live without hiding from people. I can promise you that."
It sounds like a fairytale, but, for some reason, she seems almost absolutely certain.
"That day might be tomorrow, or it might be far off in the future. Even I don't know when the sign will come. It's my first time, after all. I'm..... a little bit scared."
I have no idea what Saya's prophetic words mean, but this isn't the first time that she's said or done something mysterious. She's performed unbelievable miracles any number of times.
"So..... there's hope for us too?"
"Yeah," Saya nods cheerfully.
"I'm sure that it'll be my last present to you, Fuminori. My first and final duty."

Kouji has nothing to do but wait in the stale, moldy air.

He has spent almost half a day inside the dark, empty study, straining his ears for the slightest hint of movement below. Few people could endure such a vigil, but Kouji has accomplished it without the slightest complaint.

——It's not that it hasn't been hard, but that he hasn't minded the suffering. Rather than have nothing to do with his razor-sharp nerves, he prefers to sharpen them futher through self-abuse.

Without a doubt, his single-minded focus is the only thing allowing him to push the limits of his stamina. Kouji understands this.

He finds it pleasing to inflict pain on himself. Now that the man he'd thought was his best friend has turned his world upside down, Kouji wants nothing more than to destroy all of this insanity, including his own betrayed self.

The willpower that comes from self-hatred is stronger and longer-lasting than any faith or resolve, no matter how noble.

Thinking that Fuminori might be using the house as his hideout, Kouji snuck inside carefully, hoping to perhaps take Fuminori by surprise.

It was only after he got inside that he realized that the house was just as abandoned as it had been before. Even so, Kouji was sure that Fuminori would arrive earlier than the promised 7 P.M. in order to set up an ambush.

However, the sunlight streaming through the windows turned red, then faded to darkness with no sign of anyone coming to the house; Kouji found his patience growing weaker and weaker by the moment.

And now it's 7 P.M.

Just as Kouji's frustration is about to peak, his phone begins to vibrate and flash.

It's from Fuminori. He's calling rather than show up himself——

Despite his anger at having been tricked, Kouji manages to keep his voice calm as he

answers.

"What's going on here, Fuminori?"

"Well, I was worried that you might be wasting energy on something silly like planning an ambush," Fuminori says, chuckling scornfully.

"It's kind of late, but I guess I should tell you the real rendezvous point before you lose your mind. Did I make it in time?"

"Cut the shit....."

"Come on, don't get pissed off. I'm just being careful, right?"

Fuminori laughs with unrestrained malevolence, as though to emphasize that he's seen through Kouji's plans.

"Assuming you're at Professor Ougai's house, there's a place nearby, within walking distance. Yoh and I are there. .....Anyway, first go back to your car and use the GPS. I'll tell you the address."

"You have any proof that this isn't a trick too?"

"If you're that paranoid, you don't have to come. Just turn tail and run."

Fuminori hangs up immediately after speaking his challenge.

Kouji leaps out of his chair and kicks it across the room, unable to find any other outlet for his rage.

However, he has no choice but to do what Fuminori says.

He knows that his exhaustion is at its peak. If he stops now, he'll probably collapse like a marionette with its strings cut.

Only through his relentless obsession is he able to push his body beyond its limits.

If he allows himself even a moment's rest, he fears that he'll never again be able to find the courage or willpower to face this incident.

If he truly wants to kill Fuminori, tonight is his only chance.

Kouji knows, of course, that his enemy is probably planning to ambush him. Fuminori isn't going to be chivalrous and fight fair - not that Kouji has any right to complain.

Kouji leaves the Ougai house and heads for his Accord, moving like he's half-asleep.

Only the base of these foothills has been developed into a residential area. The address Fuminori gave Kouji is outside of that area, at the tree-covered top of one of the hills.

His car's GPS shows a road that leads nowhere, but, according to Fuminori, there should be an old, abandoned sanatorium there.

It's definitely a place that no one could find, even by accident. Maybe this next stop really will be the last.

Kouji drives up the steep incline, soon leaving the houses behind. Even though the hands of progress are right at its doorstep, the undeveloped forest is darker than he expected.

This looks like a great place to live in secret - or to kill someone in secret.

These forgotten places aren't only found far away from cities. Even when surrounded by people, places that draw no attention become blind spots in the world.

The hands of his watch move with agonizing slowness, as though counting down to the end of the world.

With entirely too much time on his hands, Kouji went back to his apartment, showered, changed clothes, and even had his first full meal in days.

He wanted to take a nap, knowing that he needed the rest, but, no matter how hard he tried, sleep never came. Forcing himself to relax only made his nerves colder and sharper.

With nothing else to do, he decides to wander aimlessly around the city until nightfall.

Downtown Tokyo is bustling with peaceful revelry. Surrounded by happily smiling pedestrians, brightly shining lights, and windows decorated early for Christmas, it seems as though all of the happiness in the world has been gathered in one place.

Kouji takes it all in, burning it into his memory like it's the last thing he'll ever see.

Is the world this beautiful because of the terrifying insanity lurking in its shadows?

He will probably never be able to bask in the glow of the city again. Perhaps that is why everything seems so dear to him.

Kouji gazes at the city for hours. It feels unreachably far from him, as though he is reading the obituary of his first love, lost in the distant past.

——His phone rings at 8 P.M. It's from Tanbo Ryouko.

Their conversation is short, ending immediately after they decide on a place to meet.

And so ends Tonoh Kouji's final night of peace.

Ryouko arrives at the 24 hour family restaurant at 1 A.M., one hour later than agreed upon.

She has a heavy-looking duffle bag under her arm. Kouji doesn't feel like asking what inside the bag is causing it to bulge out all over like that.

"Sorry, I had a lot to get together."

Ryouko doesn't sound at all apologetic, but Kouji decides not to say anything and just nods expressionlessly.

Only a few tables are filled at this hour, like lonely islands in the midst of the vast restaurant. After sending the lethargic-seeming waitress away with an order for two coffees, Kouji and Ryouko are left alone, as though forgotten, in a corner of the dining area.

"——So, did you find what you were looking for?" Kouji asks bluntly while sipping dutifully from his third cup of watery, tasteless coffee.

"I'd like to think I didn't make you wait for nothing, at least. I'm still not sure of anything, though."

"I think Fuminori is pretty stressed too. I've left him hanging for a day since I told him I'd call,

after all."

"Do you think he's that concerned about meeting you?"

"His reaction to the name 'Saya' was very clear."

In the silence that follows, Kouji tries to soothe his parched throat with another mouthful of weak coffee.

"......I see," Ryouko mutters. "So, it is 'Saya'....."

It's obvious that the frown on her face isn't because of the bad coffee.

"Have you found the answer, Doctor?" Kouji asks, practically demanding an answer. "Do you know what this 'Saya' is?"

Ryouko ignores Kouji's question by pretending to be engrossed in her coffee, but that only works until her cup is empty.

Staring at the brown stain at the bottom of her cup, Ryouko says, her voice hard and flat, "You were foolish enough to ignore my warning, but——I'm just as stubborn, so I'm going to say this one more time. Tonoh-kun, you should go home and forget about all of this."

"You really are stubborn," Kouji replies, smiling bitterly instead of getting angry like he did before.

"Are you saying that I still haven't crossed the line separating me from you and Fuminori?"

"You still haven't seen the most damning part of all of this."

"As far as you're concerned," Ryouko continues with a disparaging smirk, "your best friend in the whole world suddenly went crazy and became a cannibal. That's *all* this thing is to you, isn't it?"

That's all——

Unable to come to terms with what Fuminori has done, Kouji can only deal with it by clinging to the obsessive desire to kill Fuminori. Yet despite that, Ryouko makes this nightmare sound like just the beginning.

Kouji still doesn't understand where her morbid cynicism comes from, nor does he want to.

"You say there's something more, but aren't you just imagining it?"

"That you can think so means that your wounds are still shallow."

Once again, Ryouko brusquely states her opinion as fact, her tone making it clear that she doesn't care whether or not Kouji is satisfied with her explanation.

"If you back out now, they'll probably heal, given time. You haven't crossed the final line yet."

Without getting emotional like before, Kouji considers Ryouko's words.

The final line..... True, Fuminori is somewhere beyond that.

Although Kouji has gone far enough to be willing to kill Fuminori, he has no intention of eating his enemy's flesh once he's dead. That, at least, still separates Kouji from Fuminori.

Then, what about Ryouko, who's been treating Kouji like an ignorant fool ever since she saved him from the well? How close is she to Fuminori?

"You're saying your wounds are deeper than mine?"

In response to Kouji's sarcastic question, Ryouko's cold smile becomes a bitter, self-mocking smirk.

"This gun was my father's, you know."

Ryouko pats her duffle bag where the outline of something hard inside is clearly visible.

"Because this disappeared from his gun locker, he was kicked out of his local hunting club. I feel bad about that. My parents were always proud of me. They probably never imagined that their daughter would steal a gun from their safe."

"——So you had a good reason for doing that?"

"No, not at all."

Her quick denial isn't what Kouji was expecting.

"At the time, the Ougai mess had already ended - at least, that's what I thought. He'd vanished without a trace, and I was sure that he'd never appear before me again. I didn't take this gun because I needed to shoot or kill something."

"Then, why——"

"Because I couldn't sleep. That's all there was to it."

Ryouko pauses, apparently needing time to decide how best to explain more clearly.

"Until then," she continues, choosing her words carefully, "I'd kept a nata hidden next to my bed. I couldn't stand being alone in my room at night, you see."

"I wanted to know that, no matter how unimaginably insane the world might become, I had some choice other than just running around screaming. That's why I needed some kind of weapon that I could count on in my room."

"....."

Kouji is struck speechless. He's amazed - even impressed - that someone with such a serious case of delusional paranoia could function as one of the elite T University's leading doctors.

"It didn't really work, though. My nightmares just got worse every night. A nata just wasn't enough to let me sleep peacefully. That's when I stole my father's gun.

By cutting down the barrel like this, the shot spreads over a wider area and causes more damage. I hear that, even in America, modifying a shotgun like this is a serious crime. With the gun sitting in the back of my closet, I was finally able to sleep——one night out of three, that is."

At this point, Ryouko seems to have gotten everything off her chest that she wanted to. Smiling like someone who just finished a hard job, she adds, "A gun's a great thing to have, you know. It really is. You can use it to blow your enemies away, and, if that doesn't work, you can always stick it in your mouth and pull the trigger."

"Doctor——you should get professional help."

"Thanks for the honest opinion. You won't be able to talk like that for much longer, though. Not if you go any further."

Kouji is already doubtful that meeting with Ryouko before facing Fuminori was really the right thing to do.

The one thing that Kouji and Ryouko have in common is an unwillingness to leave Fuminori to the proper authorities.

Fuminori not only killed Kouji's lover and friend, but went so far as to defile their corpses. Kouji doesn't even want to give him the chance to get off on an insanity plea at trial.

No matter what sins he must bear, Kouji will put an end to Fuminori with his own hands. If he doesn't, he knows that he will never sleep again.

It helps to have a partner-in-crime..... but only when that partner doesn't cause trouble.

Ryouko talks big about exposing Ougai's secrets, but she might just have a head full of nonsensical delusions. If so, Kouji needs to rethink this whole thing.

"If you're telling me to leave everything to you," Kouji says with unflappable determination, "please give me some reason to trust you."

"Prove to me that there's a reason for you to be so obsessed with Ougai. Show me everything he did."

"So you'd go that far? Oh well."

Ryouko smirks and shakes her head in exasperation, but pulls a stack of paper out of her bag without further resistance. The sheets of looseleaf are bound only with cord.

"After you read one line, it continues on the same line of the next page. Anyway, just skim through it."

As directed, Kouji looks through the hand-written pages——and gives up after less than three minutes.

"Is this the manuscript for a sci-fi horror novel or something? It's a pretty bad joke. I didn't think Ougai had such childish hobbies."

Kouji deliberately scoffs at the document, doing everything he can to show contempt for what he just read. At the same time, he tries desperately not to remember the mountain of bones in Ougai's bathtub and the unidentifiable smell permeating Fuminori's house.

"The specimens and research papers that Ougai brought to the university one year ago were just as unbelievable," Ryouko says calmly, coldly ignoring Kouji's disdain.

"Apparently, he continued his research in secret, using our supplies without permission. But he made a mistake and was discovered. That's when things got crazy....."

"Judging by the equipment he was trying to use, he meant to treat his experiment as a P3-level biohazard. To be honest, that might not have been sufficient for what he was dealing with.

We should've had the nearby civilians evacuate, but the big shots did their thing and made the whole mess disappear.

In exchange, we had to go to the trouble of eliminating every single rat from the campus - including the things that used to be rats, that is."

At their first meeting, Ryouko brushed Kouji off when he asked about Ougai Masahiko. Now, however, she's telling the whole story, her voice as clear and emotionless as a machine's.

"In the end, we gave up trying to explain what had happened. No one could figure out where the materials he'd brought with him had come from.

——In retrospect, everyone did the wise thing. They knew how to keep the boundary between reason and fantasy where it should be.

I, unfortunately, was not so smart."

Ryouko pauses for a moment, then grins with self-disdain so maniacal that it strikes Kouji like a blow.

"I searched everywhere for Ougai, flushed him out, and finally learned what he'd been doing. I found the people he'd been dealing with and those who'd encouraged him to perform his experiments.

That's when I started sleeping with a nata. I'd learned just how absurd, full of holes, and unreliable our world's 'reason' is, after all."

"....."

"...So, you believe what's in this, Doctor?"

"I lost any reason to doubt it long ago."

Ryouko reaches into her duffle bag again, this time removing a stainless steel thermos that looks to hold about 500ccs.

"This is the secret weapon that'll let us defeat Saya. It was a pain to get, but it should work like a charm."

".....I can't take this anymore," Kouji snaps, no longer able to disguise his frustration.

"I don't care what Saya is anymore! All I care about is finishing off Fuminori. ——I can't leave this to you."

".....I see."

Now that she's given up on persuading him, her assent is swift and cold. At this moment, Kouji's fate has likely ceased to matter to her.

"Alright, then. You do everything you can to take down Sakisaka Fuminori. I'll take advantage of the opening you create. I won't get in your way, and I'll even take care of things when you screw up."

Despite the determination in her voice, Kouji can't bring himself to trust this paranoid doctor completely.

"Do you have a reason to kill Fuminori?"

"I like things neat and tidy, you see. I can't stand people like him who lurk outside of the world. They're like cockroaches in your bedroom. Can you sleep with them scuttling underneath your pillow? The moment I find one, I kill it and destroy all trace of its existence. I have to, for the sake of my mental well-being."

Kouji understands her feelings. They're similar to his, after all.

Kouji doesn't want to bring a murderer to justice, nor does he want to take revenge for Oumi and Yoh. If he did, he could have just left everything to the police. The reason he can't is that the villain is Fuminori. The man he believed was his friend has turned his whole world upside-down. Kouji wants nothing more than to destroy all of this insanity, including his own betrayed self. His self-loathing is what's keeping him on his feet.

"Okay, let's move in for the checkmate. Go ahead and call Sakisaka-kun out."

Kouji nods, pulls out his cell phone, and calls his friend for what will probably be the last time.

The call goes through quickly, as though Fuminori was waiting for it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Fuminori. I've finished my preparations."

"......Kouji, where are you?"

Fuminori must have been quite anxious to hear from Kouji. His voice is hard and completely emotionless.

"Let's just say I'm right behind you."

Kouji can't help but smile disdainfully at Fuminori's disappointment. Perhaps Ryouko's maniacal sadism has rubbed off on him.

"Well? Have you decided to let Tsukuba go?"

"Yeah. I suppose I have no choice."

He's lying, Kouji thinks, remembering the contents of Fuminori's refrigerator.

Just what part of Yoh did you eat, Fuminori? Did you carve that innocent girl up like a cow or a pig?

"Kouji, bring your evidence along with all the files you've gathered. When I'm satisfied that they're the real thing, I'll hand Yoh over."

"Fine. Where?"

"First, come to Y Station on the O Line. When I'm sure that you're alone, I'll tell you the exact location."

"You're being awfully careful."

"No tricks. You have 45 minutes."

Fuminori hangs up without waiting for Kouji's response.

"......He won't tell me his location until he's sure I'm alone."

"Not bad for a mere medical student. I'm impressed."

Ryouko's praise sounds serious, drawing a glare from Kouji.

"We'll leave my car here. Tonoh-kun, is your trunk large enough for a person to fit inside?"

"Yeah, but..... are you serious? You've seen too many movies."

"This adventure is more dangerous than anything you've seen in a movie."

With those bold words, Ryouko grabs her duffle bag and rises from her seat.

"......So, you're the one who chose this place to meet, right?"

"Yes, why?"

"Take responsibility for the coffee," she says, tossing him the check that was left behind by the waitress.

Even after Kouji arrives at Y Station as directed, Fuminori calls him and makes him change locations three more times.

Kouji is beginning to doubt that Fuminori is trying to make sure that he's alone. He might just be using the time to guess when Kouji arrives at the designated location.

Nevertheless, Kouji can't let his guard down. Fuminori might choose any moment to make sure that he isn't bringing any help. If he makes a mistake and puts Fuminori on alert, Ryouko will lose her chance to make a surprise attack. She'll just have to put up with the cramped trunk for a little while longer.

After the nature preserve and the dry riverbed, the fourth location Fuminori sends Kouji to is at the tree-covered top of one of the foothills, high above the developed area at their base.

His car's GPS shows a road that leads nowhere, but, according to Fuminori, there should be an old, abandoned sanatorium there.

The park and river that Fuminori sent Kouji to were empty this late at night, of course. This time, however, his instinct is telling him that it's definitely a place that no one could find, even by accident.

It looks like this is the final stop.

Kouji drives up the steep incline, leaving the houses far behind. Even though the hands of progress are right at its doorstep, the undeveloped forest is darker than he expected.

This looks like a great place to live in secret - or to kill someone in secret.

These forgotten places aren't only found far away from cities. Even when surrounded by people, places that draw no attention can become blind spots in the world.

A broken down gatepost suddenly appears in the Accord's headlights like a ghost rising from the darkness. It looks like this is the final stop.

Kouji rolls up to the gate and turns off the engine, giving himself to the silence of the forest.

His cell phone starts ringing almost immediately. He doesn't need to check who it's from, of course.

"......I'm here."

"Yeah, I heard you. Welcome to my new home."

Fuminori is nearby, close enough to hear the sound of the Accord's engine. A shiver of excitement shoots up Kouji's spine.

"Come inside. Yoh is waiting."

Fuminori hangs up without another word.

After grabbing his new maglite from the glove compartment and checking that his revolver is still in his pocket, Kouji opens the door and gets out of the car.

After grabbing his new maglite from the glove compartment and checking that the revolver is still in his pocket, Kouji opens the door——making sure to pop the trunk at exactly the same time. Ryouko shouldn't need any more explanation than that.

Realizing that the interior roof light will stay on and broadcast that the door and trunk aren't closed, Kouji quickly unscrews the bulb, then gets out of the car and deliberately slams the driver's side door hard.

Mountains of trash litter the modest front yard, forming a serviceable barricade.

Kouji sees piles of everything from small refrigerators and mopeds to huge chunks of concrete and plaster that were obviously abandoned by the construction workers. The fact that they could get away with leaving all this stuff behind shows just how remote this place is.

Glancing sidelong at the rear of his car, Kouji sees no movement whatsoever inside the barely-open trunk. Ryouko knows what she's doing. She probably intends to wait until Fuminori's attention is focused on Kouji, then make her surprise attack.

The moon is brighter than usual, allowing Kouji to walk unaided through the front yard without tripping on anything. Staying alert, he heads for the building beyond the mountains of trash.

Something must be buried underneath the piles of garbage, because the whole yard is filled with the sharp stink of chemicals.

Even homeless people probably wouldn't come to this place, much less live here. If you need to get out of the wind and rain, there are plenty of places more suitable than this.

When he reaches the doorless, gaping entrance to the building, Kouji glances back the way he came. His Accord, parked at the gate, is perfectly hidden in a blind spot behind the mountains of trash.

Even if Fuminori is watching from inside the sanitorium, he shouldn't be able to see Ryouko crawl out of the trunk. It looks like she'll get her chance to take him by surprise.

How many times has he stood alone like this in some ominously silent place far removed from his everyday life?

It's as though sneaking into deathly quiet houses and finding traces of unimaginable happenings has become as normal as going to class.

The houses that he explored before were empty and dilapidated, but the necessary trappings of life were still present. They were like freshly shed cicada shells.

This place, however, is different. The building is a perfect ruin, its walls and pillars rising from the dark forest like an army of ghosts, with no sign at all that people once lived and worked there.

The structure resembles a skeleton more than a cicada shell. Time and the elements have stripped it of its former shape, and now there is only death.

Kouji has gone as far as he can. This must be the final stop.

What will Fuminori's next move be? There's no question that he's planning to make Kouji disappear - but how?

Just as he's about to turn on his maglite, Kouji reconsiders.

If he wanders around with the light on, he'll be broadcasting his exact location. That'll give the advantage to Fuminori, who's most likely laying an ambush for him.

He holds the maglite before him in his left hand with his finger poised on the switch - in his right hand, he raises the revolver.

Keeping both the gun and the maglite pointed in the same direction so that he can be ready to aim at whatever shows up when he turns on the light, Kouji steps quietly into the dark ruin.

It takes a while for his eyes to adjust, but, even then, he has only the moonlight streaming through the empty windows to guide him. Everything appears gray and indistinct.

However, Fuminori has to deal with the same conditions if he's hiding here.

This is a battle of nerves, exhausting and dangerous, where the first to make a sound and give away his position loses.

The rooms on both sides of the hallway are all open; some are even missing their doors. Kouji sidles up to each entrance, checks to make sure no one is inside, then carefully proceeds on.

The stink that has been assaulting his nostrils since before entering the old building has changed. Now it smells more organic, like rotting meat. It's exactly the same smell that was filling Fuminori's house——

"——The organism's reticulated flesh freely expands in a manner that renders cutting and piercing meaningless meaningless meaningless——"

Kouji grits his teeth and forces the madman's words out of his head.

What good can come of taking them seriously? Now isn't the time for such useless.....

Squish.

At the sudden noise, Kouji freezes and stares down the hall.

It was a wet sound, like someone dragging their feet through a swamp——and it came from the room at the end of the hall.

Something is there - something that can make noise.

Moving silently and keeping his light and gun at the ready, Kouji creeps in the direction of the sound.

Squish, squish..... Now it sounds strange, like someone squeezing mud through their fingers, and, as he gets closer, Kouji begins to hear some kind of animal's labored breathing.

Could it be Fuminori? No, that's impossible. He should be holding his breath somewhere, waiting for a chance to ambush Kouji, not carelessly making noise.

As he proceeds, the strange sound coming through the cracks in the concrete walls becomes clearer and clearer.

".....uH.....uH.....uH....."

Kouji finds himself standing at the entrance to a room.

It's filled with a thick, viscous darkness, just like every other room that he's passed.

There is more than just darkness, however. Something is definitely..... there.

He can hear pained breathing, like that of a wounded animal, and what sounds like sobbing——

——Sobbing?

"......Who's there?" Kouji whispers into the darkness.

Now that he's given away his position by speaking, he might as well turn on his light. For some reason, however, Kouji hesitates to do something so irreversible.

Sobbing——the last time I heard her voice——on the phone, she was——sobbing——

The wheezing suddenly stops, as though whatever it is is holding its breath.

And then——

"——KoUJi..... KuN?"

A whisper comes out of the darkness. Though not a human voice - not by any measure - it speaks some blasphemous semblance of human words.

A nightmarish flash of insight connects the dots in Kouji's mind.

"......Tsukuba?"

It can't be.

Tsukuba Yoh doesn't sound like that. She doesn't smell like that.

"——KoUJi.....KuN——pLeAse——KilL..... mE——"

If it's not Yoh, then how does it know Kouji's name? Why is it begging him for help?

Even so, it can't be Yoh. She's human. She wouldn't be slithering around like whatever slimy creature is hiding in the darkness.

"——It HurTs——iT aLWayS HurTs——tHis..... BoDy——SaVe mE——KoUJi-KuN——"

The thing wriggles closer to Kouji.

His reason cries out, imploring him to switch the light in his left hand on before it's too late - or to turn and run, if he cannot.

However, Kouji is unable to accept either choice. He can only call out in vain to the amorphous shape in the darkness.

"Are you Tsukuba? Hey..... Are you really Tsukuba!?"

"—LeT Me dIe—No—MorE—PleAse—KilL meeEE—"

Something soft and slimy slides over Kouji's toes.

Instinct completely overrides his will, forcing him to turn on his light and shine it at his feet.

The white beam reveals everything - the merciless truth that finally shatters Kouji's sanity.

Terror wipes his mind of everything but two words - "gun" and "trigger" - looping endlessly through his head.

His right index finger responds with absolute obedience.

There is an instant of tremendous light and sound, both more intense than he expected, and then the destructive forces are swallowed up by the darkness.

His ears are still ringing from the bang——but he hears a weak voice coming from the shadows again.

".....iT..... HuRts....."

"Uwaah! Ahhhhhhhh!"

Kouji screams and desperately pulls the trigger again and again, believing that salvation can come only from his own finger.

Light and darkness, silence and explosion - they dance their dance three more times. Kouji doesn't even need to aim, of course. His terrifying enemy is right at his feet, far too close to miss.

Ryouko warned him about how many bullets were left in the revolver, but that information has already been driven from his mind.

Even after the cold, heavy gloom wraps itself around him once more, Kouji keeps pulling the trigger like a man possessed, paying no attention to the clicking of the empty, worthless revolver.

As though his panic-stricken body has just realized how strange it is to be standing on two legs, Kouji loses his balance and goes down hard on his backside.

Still frightened out of his mind, he keeps firing the empty gun from a sitting position. He knows no other way to erase the memory of the *thing* that he saw for a moment in the beam of his maglite.

The light, which fell from his hand during the attack, is now lying on the floor, pointing in a completely different direction.

All four bullets delivered by Kouji's finger must have hit their target, enough destruction to kill any human four times over - and they were his last card to play.

Which means that he is now sitting alone in the pitch-black darkness with no way to defend himself - and, just as he realizes this——

A mass of cold, rotting flesh rolls onto him like a tidal wave.

"ItHurtsIthuRTsithurtsIThurtsitHURTSiThUrTsItHuRtSitHuRtSIThURTsIThURTSITHURTSITHURTSSSSS!!"

He can no longer even scream as he's pushed onto his back. With fear seizing his throat in its

iron grip, Kouji struggles desperately against the thing as it crawls up his body towards his face.

"Hii.....hii.....hii.....!!"

Covering his face with his left hand, he scrabbles wildly along the floor with his right, searching for a way out that doesn't exist.

Devoid of everything but primal fear, his mind has regressed to that of a feral animal.

And that, perhaps——is why, when his right hand closes around something hard at the last moment, he is able to instinctively recognize it as a weapon.

Putting every ounce of strength into his arm, Kouji swings the heavy object in his hand at the creature on top of him.

With the wet sound of a water cushion being struck with a blunt object, Kouji's attacker rolls off of him.

As soon as he is able to move freely, Kouji leaps to his feet and grabs his new weapon with both hands, as though it's a charm to ward off evil. For the first time, he realizes that he's holding part of a rusty steel pipe.

".....il.....li.....il....."

It's sobbing again.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!!"

With a cry that's part terrified scream, part enraged roar, Kouji raises the steel pipe and brings it crashing down on the cowering creature.

He hears a wet sound and feels the blood-chilling sensation of its thick, soft flesh absorbing the blow.

These combine to evoke a physiological loathing in him that wipes his mind of all but the urge to destroy.

"Shit! Shiiiiiit!!"

Consumed by the same desperation with which he kept firing the empty gun, Kouji rains blow after blow down on his enemy.

After the tenth blow, it stops sobbing; after the twentieth blow, it stops moving; and, after the thirtieth blow, it begins to feel and sound more and more like he's beating some viscous liquid.

Kouji doesn't stop thrashing the creature until he realizes - or rather, recovers enough of his mind to realize - that, whatever it might have been, it is no longer anything but a lifeless corpse.

The pipe in his hand, covered with unidentifiable fluids and filth, suddenly feels unbearably heavy.

"You still haven't seen the most damning part of all of this."

Ryouko's voice plays back in his head. Now, at last, he knows how merciful her warning was. Now that his eyes are as open as hers, he is able to laugh disdainfully at his own foolishness.

The twenty years of memories that he has built up as Tonoh Kouji —— if they were precious and dear to him, he should never have come to this place.

The black flames of despair rise within him, consuming all other emotions. Unsatisfied, they keep burning, until their uncontrollable heat sets his blood to boiling.

Kouji recognizes that heat as anger. Right now, he is undeniably filled with hate and rage towards the person who poisoned him with the truth and tore his innocence out by the roots.

And then Kouji, slave to hate, hears the breathing of someone sneaking up behind him.

Kouji spins around, swinging his steel pipe with all the killing force he can muster.

His enemy hastily leaps back to avoid the strike, apparently not having expected his surprise attack to be foiled by Kouji's counter. Twisted shadows dance in the light of the maglite on the floor.

Readying his pipe for the next blow, Kouji faces off against his second attacker.

"Sakisaka Fuminori....."

Kouji never imagined that he would ever say his old friend's name with such hatred.

"Hey, that swing just now..... You trying to kill me or something?"

Even now, Fuminori is smiling, as though the huge axe in his hands is just some kind of joke.

"Damn..... To be honest, I thought you'd hesitate a little more."

"You thought I'd hesitate? Against you?"

Kouji sneers too, unable to contain his contempt for Fuminori's ridiculous notion.

"How did you kill Oumi, you bastard? What did you do to Tsukuba? With all that you've done, you expect me to think twice about killing you?"
".....That's my line, Kouji," Fuminori says in a low voice, looking sadly at the pile of meat that Kouji just beat to death.
"How dare the likes of you do such a horrible thing to my Yoh..... You'll taste ten times her pain before I kill you. Prepare yourself."
The blade of Fuminori's axe carves a murderous arc through the darkness, glittering menacingly in the faint light coming from the floor.
Kouji raises his pipe to block Fuminori's brute force swing.
The shock of the heavy impact shoots down his arms, but his large frame allows him to push the axe back without losing any ground.
The axe comes howling down on Kouji a second time, and then a third. Fuminori's weapon, designed for practical purposes, is significantly stronger and easier to use than the piece of pipe that Kouji just happened to find on the floor.
With his hands full protecting himself from Fuminori's axe, Kouji is unable to find an opportunity to counterattack. Each strike he blocks sends chunks of rust flying from his pipe.
"Son of a bitch!"
Kouji blocks a crushing downward swing, then pushes back before Fuminori can pull his axe away, throwing him off balance.
Stumbling backward, Fuminori plants his feet to regain his balance.
Taking advantage of his opponent's temporary immobility, Kouji delivers a punishing low kick to Fuminori's outer thigh.
"Guh!"
Fuminori grunts and retreats, swinging his axe wildly to prevent Kouji from following up with another attack.
Kouji, however, does not press his advantage. He just stands where he is, calmly spearing

Fuminori with his stare.
"You haven't been in many fights, have you?"
"Ohhh!"
Fuminori roars and comes in for another attack, but the damage to his right leg seems to be slowing his swing.
Easily blocking the axe with his pipe, Kouji waits for Fuminori to exhaust himself.
"Die! Die!!"
Howling crazily, Fuminori delivers blow after heavy blow. However, the battle has already become one where composure, not brute force, decides the victor.
When Fuminori raises his axe high for yet another attack, Kouji sees that his movements have grown dull enough. Seizing the opportunity, Kouji charges into Fuminori's range and grabs the haft of the axe with his left hand.
"!?"
As Fuminori recoils in fear, Kouji brings his pipe crashing into his enemy's unprotected side. He feels the crunch of ribs breaking.
"Gah....."
The pain drives Fuminori to his knees. Staring down at Fuminori's defenseless head, Kouji, surprised by his own lack of emotion, raises his pipe high to deliver the finishing blow.
——Which is when something wraps itself around his left ankle.
"Wha.....!?"
The instant Kouji panics at the unexpected sensation, something soft, yet strong, winds itself around his right leg and drags him to the floor before he can resist.
He twists his body and tries to swing the steel pipe at the unseen enemy behind him, but his right hand, too, is seized by the same flexible force.
He wasn't able to feel it through his pants, but now his blood turns to ice at the cold, slimy sensation of the thing wrapped around his uncovered wrist.
That monster is still.....
".....That's it..... Saya," Fuminori says encouragingly. Even while kneeling on the floor, his face twisted with pain, he manages a terrible, victorious grin.
Saya——
This thing is——

Branch

Called Fuminori

Kouji struggles desperately, trying to free his limbs from the creature's horrifying grip.
But more and more tentacles swarm over his body like snakes, stealing his freedom of movement.
"Uwah——uwahhhhh!"
The horror has already driven Kouji half mad. Just imagining the appearance of the creature attacking him is enough to threaten his sanity.
His scream is suddenly cut off as a slimy appendage seizes his throat. This most deadly tentacle isn't just cutting off his breathing and circulation - it's trying to snap his neck, and it's squeezing tighter and tighter.....
My mind hazy from the pain, I watch as Saya feasts upon her slain prey.
We've won. It was hard, and I wasn't able to do it alone, but, for the first time, we worked together to defeat our enemy.

The price was steep, of course. At least two of my ribs are definitely broken, sending a sharp pain shooting through my chest every time I breathe.

And then there's Yoh —— I didn't expect her to fall to Kouji so easily. Unlike Saya, she might have been unfamiliar with how to use her new body in combat.

My injury must have fueled Saya's anger. Her slaughter of Kouji was merciless and complete. As soon as her prey stopped moving, she sank her teeth into his vital organs and ruthlessly extinguished the last embers of life.

Though her brutal, grisly actions were unbecoming of her delicate features, Saya's face, covered in blood and gore, was like that of a victorious queen of beasts lording over her defeated foe. There was something noble and sacred about her primal ferocity that made me reluctant to disturb her.

I don't know how long I've been watching over Saya's feasting. I've nearly fainted from the pain several times. To be honest, I'm not used to violence.
The wounds I suffered in the car accident were worse, of course, but these broken ribs are the most severe injury that's ever been deliberately inflicted upon me.

Anyway, you'd think that Saya could show a little more concern for my condition. Kouji is already as dead as can be, so there's no reason for her to be in such a hurry.
I suddenly realize that Saya has stopped eating. Now she's lying on her back, rolling from side to side.
Has she eaten too much? It's been several days since we've had fresh, unfrozen meat, so I understand why she would get greedy. But still, I'm wounded here. She could give me a hand——

Because I'm preoccupied with my own selfish wants, I'm slow to realize that something is wrong.

Saya isn't just lying down. She's trembling——in agony.
My blood goes cold, and the pain from my broken ribs is suddenly forgotten.

"Saya——!?"

I jump up, run to her side, and cradle her fallen body in my arms.
Her face is pale and drenched in sweat, and her half-closed eyelids and lips are shivering. It's like she has a fever.

What's going on?
I have no idea. Could she have sustained a serious wound in the fight without my noticing? Could the meat she just ate have been poisoned somehow?
I don't understand. All I know..... is that fear is quickly overwhelming me.

"Saya! Saya!"

The only thing I can do is keep calling her name with all of my strength.
Saya slowly opens her eyes and gazes vacantly at my terrified face.

"Fuminori..... sorry. I'm fine..... Really, I'm fine. It just..... hurts a little....."
"Wha——what's wrong!? What is it!? Come on, Saya!"

There's no way that she's fine. It's glaringly obvious that her condition is dire.
Even so, I'm the only one who's panicking. Saya's expression is serene, as though she understands everything. She even smiles softly, as though trying to comfort me.

".....I can't believe it. I never thought..... that the time would come..... so soon....."

I might lose Saya - the worst possible outcome, one I don't even want to imagine. I feel overwhelmed by anxiety and despair, as though I've returned to being a helpless infant.

"Don't be afraid..... Remember what I said this afternoon? This is..... the sign. This is our..... only hope....."
"——What are you talking about!? I don't understand! Saya, pull yourself together!"

Saya answers my tearful entreaty with a smile like that of a mother comforting her child.

"I did it..... I decided to do my best. After all..... you said that you loved me..... You said..... that I was pretty....."

"——Stop this, Saya."

I don't know what's happening.
Whatever it is, though, I can't just sit by and watch as it causes Saya such excruciating pain.

"Enough! Don't push yourself anymore! I don't know what you're trying to do, but I don't want to see you in pain....."

".....Don't be like that, Fuminori....." Saya says with an exasperated smile. "Please understand....."

In a soft voice, she reveals her secret.

"They're going to be born..... Our children....."

For a while, my mind goes completely blank.

"What? When did you——?"

".....I'm surprised too..... Fuminori?"

Saya's labored breathing speaks to how much pain her tiny body is suffering - even so, she wraps her arms tightly around my neck.

"Take me outside..... To an open place..... under the sky....."

I nod. What else can I do? If I speak, I'm afraid that I'll be unable to hold back my tears. I mustn't cry - not when Saya is facing her torment so bravely.

It feels like Saya is burning up in my arms, and I fear that the terrible convulsions that shoot through her at intervals will tear her frail body to pieces.

Praying for her safety, I scoop Saya up and carry her swiftly out of the ruined building.
Maybe the cold night air will soothe her fever even a little——but that hope is futile, cruelly dashed as her breathing becomes more shallow and she moans through bluish lips.

"Saya——we're outside."

In response to my call, she opens her eyes once more.
Her gaze is cloudy and unfocused. It's clear that she can no longer see.
Nevertheless, Saya looks at me. I can tell that she's imagining my expression where my face should be.

"Just as I promised..... This is..... my final present."

"I know."

".....I hope you'll..... be happy with it....."
"Of course I will!"

It takes every ounce of my willpower, but I manage to make my voice light and cheerful.
In Saya's mind's eye, I know that I'm smiling. She won't have to see my face streaked with tears.

"Fuminori..... To you, who loved me..... I give..... this planet....."

Saya's whisper is weak and pained, but there is ecstasy in her voice - ecstasy, and joy.

Her back suddenly shifts, then bulges outward.

"This world..... will surely..... become beautiful," Saya says softly, as though reciting a prayer.
"A world..... just for us....."

And then, Saya blooms. ——How else can I describe it?
Flower petals..... Long and wide, they spread from her back like the wings of a newly-formed butterfly.

Their brilliant glow comes from the countless tiny scales that cover each petal like particles of light.

".....Is this goodbye?" I ask her, careful to keep the sorrow out of my voice.
"——No, it isn't. This is——the beginning——"

Saya's pain must have already left her, for her expression is infinitely peaceful and content.

"The beginning——of our world——"

The radiant motes rise on the wind, covering the frozen winter sky with glittering rivers of light.

It is beautiful - overwhelmingly, painfully beautiful.
It is the song that heralds the coming of the new world and the destruction of the old.
Singing victoriously of their freedom, the shining seeds of life are released into this vast and fertile land.
It is a boundless healing——
It is an eternal blessing——
We shall fill the world with our joy.

".....Now we'll be together forever, won't we?"

Embracing Saya's pitifully shrunken body, I gaze into the shining sky and let my tears flow freely. Thank you.
Thank you for this last gift, Saya.

She was worried, at first, about how long the preserved foods in the underground storeroom would last her, but now it seems that her fears were unfounded.

It's the liquor that she should have worried about.
By savoring each drop of Spirytus as though it were her last, she thought that her flask would hold out a little longer——but she must have been consuming more each day than she realized.
Who can blame her? In retrospect, there's no way that she could have gotten through this without the intoxicating effects of distilled alcohol.

After Ryouko chased useless emotions like hope and despair from her mind, she found herself spending the most peaceful days of her life.
As resignation set in, hate and fear left her. Now she feels only awe for what Ougai Masahiko did and respect for the depth of his intellectual curiosity.
After all, neither she nor this world have any reason left to deny his research.

Alone in the mountain cabin, Ryouko killed time by bringing order to the documents that Ougai had left behind.
She took the scattered, enciphered papers and rewrote them in a more readable fashion, eliminating redundancies and improving their ability to be indexed.

Ryouko didn't intend for anyone to read them, of course. She knew full well how meaningless her actions were.
With her reason to live gone, however, having something to devote her mind to was at least some relief.

And now, with the last congratulatory drops of Spirytus vodka burning their way down Ryouko's throat, all of Ougai's research lies before her in a single volume. She has finally finished transcribing and annotating the last of his writings.

Enjoying the pointless satisfaction of a job well done, she idly pages through the manuscript that she just completed.

"I shall conclude by summarizing my theory as it currently stands.
The lifeform that I named Saya did not appear in our universe by chance, nor even as a result of my summoning——but because of the instincts that were programmed directly into

her biology.
She was created to fulfill the same ultimate purpose that all life shares: reproduction.
Saya and her kind procreate by spreading their seeds to other dimensions."

"What is the probability that they will discover a doorway to another world? Even if they succeed in doing so, the chance of that world being suitable for reproduction must be even more minute.
In order to make the most of that scant probability, evolution has granted them a certain ability - none other than the astonishing ability that I have witnessed in Saya.
To wit——they select the most prosperous species that they encounter, take control of it, and, in doing so, gain dominance over that planet's biosphere. In other words, they 'hijack' the entire species.
Upon finding the species that exerts the most control over the planet, they overwrite its genetic code and remake it in their own image. Saya's body is more than capable of this."

"There is a significant probability that the target species will have evolved into intelligent life. This element may be necessary to gaining control of the planet's environment. Therefore, Saya and her sisters also plunder their target's culture and psychology. Her extraordinary learning ability and intellectual curiosity are likely instinctive tools that enable her to inherit the target species's entire wealth of knowledge."

"In fact, it may be that Saya's kind has always had their sights set on intelligent life.
Perhaps they wait patiently for some foolish, extradimensional species to gain knowledge of other worlds and, in attempting to fulfill its curiosity, make contact with the outer universe in which they dwell. Rather than send Saya and her comrades on their dimensional journies with only luck and their own strength to depend on, would not waiting for such contact greatly increase the chance of finding a world worthy of conquest?
Just as I, having acquired the Silver Key, fancied myself an explorer of the unknown - how many intelligent lifeforms on other worlds have thoughtlessly congratulated themselves for 'discovering' Saya's sisters?"

Taken by the sudden urge to go outside for a change, Ryouko gathers up the manuscript that she was reading and heads to her car, which is parked in the front yard.

After all, she has completed her self-imposed final duty. There is no longer any reason for her to remain holed up inside the mountain cabin.

She drives a little further up the mountain, to an open place that offers a scenic view of the land below.
In the early days of the change, Ryouko often came to this spot to helplessly watch over the mutating city.

"The one flaw in my theory comes from none other than Saya herself.
After using me to learn everything about humanity, Saya should have finally been prepared to begin the last stage of her invasion. However, she never carried out her mission. Why?

"I hypothesize——that Saya was an irregular, even among her own kind.
It is said that the human race's intelligence has allowed it to conquer its instincts. Perhaps Saya accidentally inherited the disease that infects our entire species.
By absorbing the human psyche, she might have allowed the many schools of thought that conflict with our natural instincts to severely damage her reproductive urges."

"What is human love, really? What behavior could be more of a hindrance to the efficient propagation of a species?
I am reminded of how, at the end of her studies, Saya consumed vast quantities of old and new romantic literature from all over the world.
She tried to understand romance as an integral part of the human reproductive process. As

a result, she might have unwittingly neutered her own unparalleled reproductive abilities. After all——she had not known love."

"She had come to this world to rule it in humanity's place, and had studied our species in order to fulfill that purpose - but, ultimately, she could not share love with a human. Without love's blessing, Saya was unable to find the enthusiasm necessary to fill this world with her kind.

After learning everything there was to know about humanity, she herself became irreversibly human. Weary of loneliness, she despaired of the world - how pure her maiden's soul must have been.
If this hypothesis is correct, then it means that I have failed as her teacher. I cannot help but feel ashamed for having spoiled such an extraordinary organism."

Saya —— next to Ougai Masahiko, Ryouko now knows more about that entity than anyone else.
No..... When the young man named Sakisaka Fuminori is added to the running, perhaps she only comes in third.

In the end, she never encountered the creature face to face. She would have liked to meet it once, though.
If Ougai's analysis of Saya's psychology is correct, then it must have been Sakisaka who restored her desire to conquer the world.

Perhaps, as Sakisaka's chief physician, Ryouko played some role in bringing that lonely young man and Saya together - in which case, she should at least have the right to attend their wedding-to-end-all-weddings.
If Ryouko were a man, she might even have charged them a matchmaker's fee.

"I have a dream——that one day my daughter will know the blessings of love.
I pray that there will come a day when her heart burns with the flames of passion, and her world becomes bright and joyous once more."

"When that day comes, Saya, your terrible, irresistable purpose will surely consume us, that your progeny might flourish. The whole world will know your love, and be reborn.
Ahh, how glorious the future is."

"I deeply regret that I must end my life before I can see that day come, but the footsteps of those who would expose my dream are getting closer by the hour.
If I seal my lips in death, then their vengeful hands will not reach you."

"Please forgive me, Saya, for leaving you alone in this barren world.
With the knowledge that you now possess, I know that you will be able to find your own path. The radiance of your hard-won soul shall light the road ahead. Have no fear. Have no doubt. March onward, until you reach your answer at last.
And I, Saya, will dream forever of the future that you will bring——"

Perhaps it's the isolated environment or the mountain air; maybe she's just more resistant to the change..... Whatever the case, Ryouko has not yet become as inhuman as the creatures wriggling through the city below.

She doesn't know exactly how many people on this planet could still be called "human," but she's one of what must be only a handful of survivors who are left to watch over the end of human civilization.

Of course, it's only a matter of time before she changes too.
It's been three days since she chopped off her right hand - which had ceased to function as anything resembling a human hand - but the itching that has spread across her entire back is

growing more intolerable by the hour.
She could look in a mirror to see what she is becoming, but she doubts that that would make her happy.

Ryouko thinks that maybe it would be best to just go to sleep here, with the world spread out before her.

When she awakens, perhaps she'll be ready to descend the mountain and join in the city's revelries. Or maybe she won't even need such resolve anymore.

Whatever the case, Ryouko thinks dreamily, as she licks the very last drop of vodka from her flask.

After I stop being human, I hope I'll still be able to enjoy the taste of booze.

END: The Song of Saya

Called Ryouko:

I'm going to die..... Just as that final thought enters his fading consciouness, a sudden explosion brings him back to his senses.

"Gyaaaaaa!"

With a horrifying, inhuman scream, the creature releases Kouji and retracts its tentacles. The first thing he sees after regaining his mobility is Ryouko running down the hall with a smoking shotgun in her hand.

"Doctor!"

Ryouko responds by tossing the silver tube in her other hand to Kouji, who's still lying on the floor.
It's the thermos she showed him at the restaurant, the one that she called her "secret weapon"——

"Pour it on that thing!" Ryouko shouts to Kouji. At the same time, she aims her gun at Fuminori, who's still on his knees about five paces away. The double-barreled sawed-off hunting shotgun still has one shot loaded.
The monster that attacked Kouji is writhing in agony, apparently still recovering from Ryouko's shot.
He's already seen, however, that bullets aren't enough to kill these creatures. Now is his only chance.

"You..... What are you doing.....?"
Gritting his teeth against the pain of his broken ribs, Fuminori glares at Kouji and Ryouko.
Forcing himself to be calm, Kouji stands and carefully unscrews the lid of the thermos. There's no question in his mind that something extremely potent is inside.
As soon as it's unsealed, a thick white mist pours out of the thermos and the surrounding air suddenly becomes freezing cold.
This is——
Guessing what's inside, Kouji ruthlessly throws the thermos at the pile of flesh convulsing on the floor.
The thermos sails through the air, spewing white fog like a smoke grenade, its liquid contents

spraying the creature crawling on the floor like a baptismal font.

"HiGyaAaAaAAA!!"
Its scream this time is literally a death cry, incomparable to before.

"Hil! hIi! Hil! HiGiiiIIII!"
Wreathed in white smoke, the monster thrashes in agony. Its screams are joined by Ryouko's cackling.

"Ahahahaha! How do you like that!? Minus 197 degrees! Is it cold? Hot? Not so tough now, are you!?"
To Ryouko, perhaps the joy of defeating her nightmare was worth sacrificing her sanity.....
The expression on her face as she laughs maniacally is clearly that of someone no longer in their right mind.

"Damn you..... I'll kill you!!"
Fuminori staggers to his feet, roaring black curses. His rage seems to have drowned out the pain of his broken bones.
Ryouko is not one to underestimate the threat posed by his axe. Her mad laughter fades away, leaving behind a cold smile as she pulls the trigger.
With a short burst of dark flame, Ryouko's gun sputters and dies.

"......Tch!"
Ryouko is not an expert on firearms; she never knew that shotgun shells need to be properly stored. In any case, she always expected that any situation where her gun would be necessary would also be one that she would not survive.
Cursing in anger and dismay, Ryouko breaks the shotgun open and awkwardly pulls the dud out. Meanwhile, Fuminori stalks towards Ryouko like a vengeful demon, dragging the head of his axe along the floor.
This is bad——Kouji tries to charge at Fuminori, but only succeeds at sending himself sprawling again.
One of his shoes is stuck to the floor, rendering him immobile. He realizes that the liquid nitrogen he poured on Saya has also frozen the floor around him.
As Ryouko fumbles in her pocket for a new shell, Fuminori closes the distance and raises his axe in both hands.

"Damn!"
Kouji curses and rips his shoe free of the frozen concrete, but he won't be able to make it to them in time.
Ryouko thrusts a new shell into the chamber of her shotgun and snaps it closed, then looks up to find her target.
Fuminori is right before her, too close to evade, and his axe is already crashing down upon her with the wind howling in its wake.

"Stop!!"
The sounds of bones shattering, tendons snapping, and flesh tearing blend together in foul harmony.

"Guh.....!"
The thick blade has entered through Ryouko's left shoulder, plowing through her collarbone and shoulder blade, smashing several ribs, and popping her lung like a balloon before stopping in the center of her chest.
Her expression frozen in shock by the impact, Ryouko sprays a geyser of blood from her mouth.
She should have died instantly——but, through some unimaginable force of will, Ryouko clings to life for a few seconds more. Grinning through her bloodstained lips, she raises her shotgun.
——Not to the front, but to the side.

Beyond the barrel of her gun, half of its body wearing the 77-degree Kelvin mist like a white cloak of death, is the weakly wriggling Saya.

"No!!!"
The 12-gauge shotgun drowns out Fuminori's scream in a thunderous explosion of light and sound far more powerful than that of Kouji's revolver.
The destruction is absolute. The impact of the shotgun pellets completely blows away the part of Saya's body that fell prey to the liquid nitrogen.
The frozen particles of Saya's shattered flesh drift to the floor like snow.
Even Saya's special biology is insufficient to seal a wound of this size.
Nearly half of her body is gone, and from the opening pour her innards - a tide of liquid, slime, and fat whose color is far too foul to belong to any living creature.

"......aH......aH.....AhHh....."
The monster convulses, wailing in a weak, pitiful voice.

"Saya——"
With his axe still buried in Ryouko's body, Fuminori stares at the dying creature, his expression utterly devoid of emotion.
Kouji grabs his pipe and prepares to attack Fuminori from behind, but freezes when he sees the emptiness on the face of the man he'd hated as a murderer.
Fuminori pulls his axe out of Ryouko's corpse, then looks at Kouji with glazed eyes, as though he doesn't recognize who he is.
When Kouji meets Fuminori's blank stare, he knows —— there is no longer anything left in Fuminori to kill.
Fuminori grips the axe closer to its head and raises it high, the blade pointing at his face.

"....."
Kouji doesn't know whether or not he should interfere - but even if he wanted to, what could he say to stop Fuminori?

Fuminori pulls his head back slowly, yet surely..... then drives his face into the blade of the axe like a spring-loaded toy.

Crunch..... His skull caves in with a dull, wet sound, and the spray of blood catches Kouji in the face.

Despite Fuminori's complete lack of hesitation, his first attempt at suicide only succeeds in transforming his face into a piece of crimson art.
Fuminori pulls his head back one more time, even slower than before, then, with every ounce of strength left in his body, slams it into the bloodstained axe.

The sound is wetter than before.

Like a marionette with its strings cut, Fuminori tumbles face-first to the floor.

Kouji stares at the two mangled corpses for a while, feeling completely left behind, like he doesn't even know why he's standing in this place with a steel pipe in his hand.
The stale air filling the ruined building becomes choked with the stench of blood, and the crimson puddles gradually spread across the snow-covered floor - yet the tranquility of the scene makes it seem like a painting.

A soft, slimy sound breaks the silence.
Kouji looks at the mortally wounded monster as though just remembering that it's there.
The creature is clearly on death's door - even so, it moves. Slowly, feebly, it drags its broken body through the sea of blood covering the floor. ——It's coming for Fuminori.

Kouji had forgotten his anger, but now it comes surging back at full force.

"......Die."

Kouji growls and stabs the monster with the end of his steel pipe. It convulses in agony, but keeps crawling towards Fuminori.

Kouji explodes into a frenzy of rage.

"Die! Just die already! Stay the hell away from Fuminori!"

Again and again, he smashes the helpless flesh-beast with his pipe. For some reason, he is convinced that, if he doesn't stop it here, he will have truly lost.

The monster, however, never succumbs to Kouji's beating, and finally reaches Fuminori's corpse.

"Don't touch him! Don't touch Fuminori! Damn you! Who the hell do you think you are!"

On the verge of tears, Kouji continues to swing his pipe furiously. The monster's slimy fluids fly through the air, joining with the blood already covering his face.

The creature extends one thin, trembling tentacle to touch Fuminori's shoulder, then lovingly caresses his blood-stained cheek——

And then it stops moving.

Even in its final moments, the monster would not let go of Fuminori. It died joined with him.

At last, Kouji knows that he has lost everything forever.

"Hey, " Oumi says enthusiastically, the exposed bones of her face clattering, "why don't we go somewhere with skating for this year's ski trip?"

Chunks of her body are missing, as though something's been nibbling on her. It makes her look a lot thinner. She's been worried about her weight recently, but now she shouldn't need to diet.

"Haha," Fuminori laughs at Oumi's crazy suggestion. "That's right. You just started skating recently, didn't you?"

He sounds amused, but it's hard to tell from his expression, since his face has been cleaved in two by an axe.
"I don't think there're many first-time skaters in their twenties these days."
"I was kinda scared when I was little. Those shoes seemed like knives to me."
"Yeah, I know. If someone kicked you in the face with those on, you'd probably end up like me."

Oumi and Yoh laugh at Fuminori's dumb joke.

Yoh never used to laugh with such exuberance.

Now that she and Fuminori are officially lovers, she seems truly happy.

"But you were able to kill him on your first try? That's amazing, Oumi-chan."
"It's not very different from swinging a baseball bat, after all. You swing hard and let the weight of the axe do the damage."

"That's what Fuminori said, so I took his word for it and gave killing him a try. And it was fun!"

What is this strange feeling? Something is wrong, though Kouji can't put his finger on exactly what——

"Hmm..... I want to see Oumi-chan being eaten too....."

Ah, that's it.

When he sees Yoh's envious smile, Kouji finally realizes what's wrong.

"Hey, Tsukuba....."
"Hm? What's wrong, Kouji-kun?"
"Why are you..... the only one who's normal?"

Yoh tilts her head quizzically, like she doesn't understand what he means.
"Normal? I'm always normal."
"But, back then, you were——"

"Oh, I get it," Yoh nods in understanding.

"You're talking about when I looked different than you? That was such a long time ago."
"It..... was?"
"Of course!" she replies, deflecting Kouji's confusion with that uncannily cheerful smile.

"After all, you're one of us now."
"——"

Oh, of course.

Kouji looks down and is satisfied to see wriggling tentacles where his arms and legs should be.

When he opens his eyes, his pillow and mattress are soaked in sweat.

It's always the same nightmare. He doesn't know how many times he's seen it, but at least he's not leaping out of bed screaming anymore.
Clutching his throbbing head, Kouji sits up in bed.

It's four in the morning.

He hasn't had nearly enough rest, but he probably won't be able to get back to sleep tonight. Anyway, it's time for a smoke. A full pack will last him until dawn. Now, where did he put the pack he bought yesterday?

Kouji wanders sleepily into the den, where yet another old friend is waiting for him.

"You look like hell, seriously."
"——Oh, Doctor. You're here too?"

Ryouko's chopped-up corpse is sitting at his dining table, looking as deathly pale as ever as she sips coffee from a mug.

"You suffer every night, don't you? I bet you're not getting enough sleep."

"It's not always like this," Kouji says amicably, as he sits down across from her. "If I take some medicine, it usually helps. For now."

Hallucinations like these are easier to deal with than elaborate nightmares like the one he just had. They should probably worry him more, though.

"If you'd listened to my warnings back then, you wouldn't be in such bad shape now."

"Let's stop talking about that. What's done is done."

Ryouko chuckles, smiling the same cruel, manic smile that she used to when she was alive. Her left arm hangs from her half-severed shoulder, dangling like a forgotten wind chime.

"I see..... Looks like you've come to terms with it."

"You were the same, weren't you? You managed to live as an elite neurosurgeon most of the time, after all."

"If you're just keeping up a facade, it's not that hard."

The corpse shrugs her shoulders - her intact right shoulder, that is - and grimaces in disgust as she takes another sip of her coffee.

"But it's probably only going to get worse, you know. Time heals emotional wounds, but with you, it's more like you've been poisoned."

She's probably right.

Everyone dreams at night. No matter how dim the memories may get, the nightmares will always be there to tear into Kouji with fresh fangs.

The insanity that has taken root in his heart will grow, eventually consuming everything that's left inside of him.

"In my case, I've had you to learn from. I'm ready for anything."

"Oh, really?"

Kouji nods, smiling confidently, then stands and walks into the bathroom, where he retrieves the weapon that he keeps hidden behind the mirror.

It's Ougai's revolver, the one souvenir that Kouji brought back from the other world that night.

"It was a lot of trouble, but I finally found someone who deals in these things. I bought bullets for it. Can you believe that ammunition is more expensive than the gun itself?"

"How about that."

In the mirror, Kouji sees Ryouko with her axe-inflicted gash reversed. She raises her mug as though to toast Kouji's resourcefulness.

"So, how many shots did you buy?"

"Just one."

This time, it's Kouji who shrugs his shoulders. He uses both, exercising his privilege as a survivor.

"You see——I never want to be in a situation where I'll need more."

"Oh.....?"

The corpse in the mirror nods, seeming strangely reserved.

"You really do get it, Tonoh-kun."

There's a brief silence.

Kouji doesn't really feel like getting all melancholy with a corpse.

"Hey, Doctor, let's give the diner coffee a rest. If you want, I'll put on a new pot of——"

When Kouji turns around, halfway through his sentence, he realizes that the dining room is empty but for the silence of the night.

"....."

And so, Kouji finally returns to the world of the sane.

He lights his first cigarette of the night and takes a deep drag. While sitting alone in his den, puffing on his smoke, he stares at the gun in his hand.

He knows just how precarious a cliff he's standing on.

The "final line" that Ryouko spoke of is now one step behind him. Having finally crossed that line, Kouji no longer has anything to protect his soul.

Now that Ougai Masahiko's delusions and Tanbo Ryouko's paranoia have all become tangible horrors, he knows what insanity and despair truly are.

Even in the real world, Sakisaka Fuminori is already wanted for several gruesome murders.

It didn't take long for someone to discover the stockpiles of human meat in the empty Sakisaka and Suzumi houses. In the two refrigerators were found the remains of Suzumi Yousuke, his wife and daughter, and Takahata Oumi.

They found the clothes and other effects of Tsukuba Yoh, but were unable to locate any trace of her among the various body parts - a fact that made Kouji's nightmares all the more vivid.

Doctor Tanbo Ryouko of the T University Hospital mysteriously vanished at the same time. Because she was Fuminori's chief physician, the police have been investigating her connection to his crimes.

As for the two corpses secretly buried in the backyard of a certain ruin - well, they'll probably never be found, and this incident will just become another cold case.

Kouji alone knows what really happened, and he has no intention of revealing it - not now, and not ever.

Ougai's writings were not nonsense, which means that everything else was.

What fool was it who said that men are the lords of Creation?

Those who believe in the worth of meaningless things like human wisdom and valor——are those lucky people who have not looked into the Abyss.

Kouji no longer has any common ground with those who are blessed with such ignorance and innocence.

He knows. He has been defiled by the insanity called Truth, and he will never be able to believe again.

If he has been poisoned, then that poison is none other than the truth itself.

Just as pure oxygen is harmful to the body, the naked truth has the power to destroy men's minds.

Oxygen only becomes air when combined with five times as much nitrogen. Truth is the same. Only by diluting it with lies and taking it in small doses can humans maintain a healthy soul.

"No matter how unimaginably insane the world might become——"

Words once spoken by the living Tanbo Ryouko pass through Kouji's mind.

"I had some choice other than just running around screaming——"

Without a doubt, that was the comfort that she kept hidden in her bosom - the only thing that allowed her to face her dreams each night.

Kouji has taken his predecessor's lessons to heart. Of course he's prepared.

One bullet is always behind the bathroom mirror, promising him salvation.

End: World's Sanity